

Beyond the Mainstream: Minority and Niche Religions of the Kurds

I. Introduction: Religious Diversity Beyond the Mainstream in Kurdistan

Kurdistan, the broadly defined geographic and cultural region traditionally inhabited primarily by the Kurdish people, encompasses extensive plateau and mountain areas spanning parts of modern-day eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, western Iran, and smaller sections of northern Syria and Armenia.¹ While the majority of Kurds adhere to Sunni Islam, predominantly following the Shafi'i school of law², this identification often overshadows the region's profound and complex religious diversity. Historically, Kurdistan has served as a "reservoir of religions"⁵, a landscape where numerous faiths and traditions have coexisted, interacted, and sometimes clashed.³ Beyond the Islamic mainstream, this includes ancient communities of Christians and Jews, as well as distinct ethno-religious groups like the Yarsanis (Ahl-e Haqq or Kaka'i), Alevi (particularly Kurdish Alevi), and others whose beliefs often blend elements from various sources, including pre-Islamic Iranian traditions, heterodox interpretations of Islam (especially Sufi and Shi'i strands), and local customs.³

The study of religion in Kurdistan has often focused disproportionately on these minority communities, sometimes leading to what scholars critique as a "minorities paradigm".³ This approach, while valuable for highlighting vulnerable groups, can inadvertently obscure the internal diversity within Kurdish Islam itself—such as the significant role of Sufi orders like the Qadiriyya and Naqshbandiyya³—and risks treating the majority faith as monolithic. Furthermore, the very concept of "minority" is not merely numerical; it often reflects power dynamics and processes of "minorization" by dominant state or social actors, potentially legitimizing assimilationist or exclusionary practices.³ Recognizing this complexity, this report focuses, as requested, on specific minority and niche religious traditions associated historically or currently with Kurdish populations, namely Yarsanism, Kurdish Alevism, the historical and revived presence of Zoroastrianism, the legacy of Kurdistan Jewish communities within Kurdish regions (including ethnic Kurdish converts), and the syncretic Shabak tradition.⁵ Mainstream Sunni and Shia Islam, along with Yazidism, are excluded as primary subjects but acknowledged as vital parts of the broader context.

Studying these communities holds significant importance. They represent unique cultural and historical trajectories, often preserving beliefs and practices with deep roots in the region's past.⁷ Many of these groups face considerable challenges, including historical and ongoing persecution, discrimination, political marginalization, forced assimilation, displacement, and violence, particularly highlighted by the atrocities committed by the Islamic State (ISIS) against groups like Yazidis, Christians, Kaka'i, and Shabaks.⁹ Their experiences illuminate the

intricate and often volatile interplay of religion, ethnicity, identity politics, and state power in the Middle East. Furthermore, the frequent invocation of pre-Islamic origins (Zoroastrian, ancient Iranian) across several of these traditions ⁷ points towards a recurring theme in Kurdish identity formation, potentially functioning as a counter-narrative to the dominant Islamic identities of neighboring Arab, Turkish, and Persian populations. This pattern suggests that appealing to an ancient, non-Islamic heritage serves to articulate a distinct Kurdish cultural and historical consciousness, particularly in contexts of political struggle or cultural revival, such as the post-ISIS emergence of Zoroastrianism in Iraqi Kurdistan.¹⁵

This report will proceed by examining each specified religious group in detail, exploring their origins, core tenets, rituals, social structures, demographics, relationship with Kurdish identity, and areas of uncertainty. Following these individual sections, a comparative synthesis will highlight shared themes, syncretic elements, and divergent paths. Finally, the report will address significant gaps in academic knowledge and conclude by reflecting on the enduring religious plurality of Kurdistan.

II. Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq / Kaka'i): The Path of the Friends

Yarsanism, whose adherents refer to themselves as Yarsan ('Group of Friends') or Ahl-e Haqq ('People of Truth'), and are known in Iraq as Kaka'i ('Members of the Brotherhood') ⁷, represents one of the most significant non-mainstream religious traditions associated with the Kurds. Outsiders have sometimes applied the term 'Ali-Allahi' ('Worshippers of Ali'), but Yarsanis generally reject this label as misleading, as Ali ibn Abi Talib, while revered as a divine manifestation, plays a less central role than other figures in their complex cosmology.⁷

Origins, Historical Development, and Kurdish Identity

The religion is primarily traced to the teachings of Sultan Sahak (also Sohak), a historical figure believed to have lived in the late 14th or early 15th century in the Guran region of western Iran.²⁸ Yarsani tradition often presents a semi-mythical history preceding Sultan Sahak, potentially incorporating earlier figures like Shah Khoshin, whose legends are set in Lorestan and may represent an earlier phase of the doctrine's development in the highlands.³⁰ Scholarly consensus suggests Yarsanism emerged from a complex syncretic process, drawing influences from extremist Shi'ite (Ghulāt) traditions, particularly those prevalent in the lower Tigris and Karun regions until the 16th century ³⁰, Sufism (evident in terminology and structure) ²⁹, and potentially much older pre-Islamic Iranian or Kurdish beliefs.⁷ Sultan Sahak, considered the primary divine manifestation of the current epoch, is credited with giving the religion its definitive form.³⁰

Yarsanism is deeply intertwined with Kurdish identity. Its heartlands lie within Kurdish-speaking territories: the Guran region around Kermanshah, Lorestan in western Iran, and adjacent areas of Iraqi Kurdistan around Kirkuk, Sulaymaniyah, Halabja, and Diyala.¹⁸ The majority of its followers are ethnic Kurds belonging to specific tribes such as the Guran, Sanjabi, Kalhor, Zangana, and Jalalvand.²⁸ Furthermore, the most sacred religious literature is composed primarily in Gorani (also Gurani), a distinct Kurdish language group historically

prestigious in the eastern Kurdish regions, although few modern Yarsanis retain literacy in it, typically speaking Southern Kurdish or Sorani as their mother tongue.²⁸ This linguistic connection underscores the religion's strong roots within Kurdish culture, even as some adherents include non-Kurds like Shabaks and ethnic Turkomans.²⁸

Theological Framework

Yarsanism presents a complex theological system characterized by syncretism, esotericism, and distinct doctrines:

- **Syncretism:** It blends diverse elements. The influence of Ghulāt Shi'ism is seen in the reverence for Ali and the concept of divine incarnations.⁷ Sufism contributes terminology (Pir, Murid), organizational patterns, and possibly ritual elements like the *jam*.²⁹ Pre-Islamic Iranian elements are suggested by beliefs like metempsychosis and possibly aspects of the cosmology.⁷
- **Cosmology:** The universe is perceived as having two interrelated dimensions: the external, perceptible world (*zāhirī*) and the internal, hidden reality (*bātinī*) that governs it.²⁸ History is viewed cyclically (*dowre*), with each epoch representing a recurrence of the primordial creation myth involving God, a Pearl containing the world's elements, and the Seven Beings (*Haft Tan*).²⁹
- **Divine Manifestations (*Mazhariyyat*):** A core belief is that the Divine Essence manifests successively in human form throughout history.²⁸ Each major epoch (*dowre*) features a primary manifestation and seven secondary ones (the *Haft Tan*). Key primary manifestations include Khawandagar (Creator in the first epoch), Ali ibn Abi Talib (second epoch), Shah Khoshin (third epoch), and Sultan Sahak (fourth and current epoch).²⁸ Yarsani lore includes a narrative of Sultan Sahak's miraculous virgin birth from Khatun-e Rezbar (or Dayerak Rezbar), herself one of the *Haft Tan*, after she ingested a pomegranate seed dropped by a bird.²⁸
- **The Heptad (*Haft Tan*):** These "Seven Persons" or archangels are central to Yarsani cosmology and assist the primary divine manifestation in each epoch.²⁸ In Sultan Sahak's epoch, they include figures like Pir Benjamin (Binyamin), Pir Musi, Dawud (David), and Khatun-e Rezbar.²⁸
- **Reincarnation (*Dunadunī*):** The belief in the transmigration of the soul ("moving from form to form" or "changing of garments") is fundamental.⁸ The soul undergoes a cycle of 1,001 rebirths to achieve purification.³⁰ Some traditions suggest salvation is restricted to the *zarda-gel* ('people of yellow clay', i.e., the Yarsan), while the *kāk-e sīāh* ('people of black earth') are eternally damned.³⁰ The cycles culminate in a final judgment.³⁰
- **Esotericism:** Yarsanism emphasizes hidden (*bāten*) truths accessible only through initiation, study of sacred lore under a spiritual guide (*Pir*), and direct mystical perception (*didedār*).²⁸ This contributes to the religion's often secretive nature.²⁸

Sacred Heritage

Yarsanism lacks a single, universally recognized canonical scripture.³⁰ Instead, its sacred heritage comprises a body of texts and a strong oral tradition:

- **Primary Texts:** The most revered collection is the *Kalâm-e Saranjâm* ('Discourse of Conclusion' or 'Book of Perfection'), attributed to the 15th century and based on Sultan Sahak's teachings.²⁸ It primarily consists of poetic texts (*kalâm*) composed mainly in Gorani Kurdish.²⁸ Other important collections exist, such as the *Daftar-e Khezāna-ye Perdīvarī* ('Book of the Treasure of Perdīvar'), containing mythological poems highly esteemed in the Guran region.³⁰ More recent figures like Hajj Ne'matollah Mokri Jeyhunabadi (d. 1920) also composed influential works in Persian and Kurdish.²⁹
- **Oral Tradition:** For centuries, oral transmission was the dominant mode of preserving and conveying religious knowledge.⁷ Written manuscripts (*daftar*) were often scarce and treated more as sacred objects.²⁹ The full meaning of the *kalâms* often depends on understanding the associated myths and narratives passed down orally, typically within priestly lineages.²⁹ This reliance on oral tradition contributes to variations in beliefs and practices across different communities.⁷
- **Language:** The predominance of Gorani in the core sacred texts presents a challenge, as literacy in this language has declined significantly among modern Yarsanis, whose mother tongues are often Southern Kurdish or Sorani.²⁸ This linguistic gap potentially hinders direct access to foundational texts for many adherents, increasing reliance on interpretations by religious specialists or leading to shifts in focus towards more accessible traditions. While texts in Turkic, Persian, and other Kurdish forms exist²⁹, Gorani holds primary sacred status.

Ritual Life

Yarsani religious life revolves around communal rituals where music and shared participation are central:

- **The Jam ('Meeting'):** This is the cornerstone ritual, requiring a minimum of seven male participants seated in a circle, supervised by a Sayyed.²⁹ Others may observe from outside the circle. Participants must remain still during the session.³³ The ritual involves prayers, the singing of sacred poems (*kalâm* and *nazm*), and the ritual partaking of consecrated food (sweets, fruit, or sacrificed meat) and water passed around the circle.²⁹
- **Music and the Tanbur:** Music is indispensable ("Where members of other religions pray or listen to sermons, the Yārsān sing"²⁹). The *tanbur*, a long-necked fretted lute, is considered a sacred instrument and is played exclusively during the *jam* to accompany the religious singing.²⁸ The performance typically involves alternation between a lead singer (*kalāmkhwān*) and communal responses.²⁹
- **Sacrifices:** Ritual sacrifices, termed *qorbāni* or *khedemat*, involve offerings like a rooster, sheep, or goat, or specially prepared rice (*khedemat*), always accompanied by bread.³³ These offerings are prepared by men (except the bread) and consecrated by the Sayyed during the *jam* before consumption.³³ The term *sabz namūdan* ('to make green') is also used for sacrifices, possibly linking them to older fertility concepts.³⁰
- **Initiation (Sar-sepordan):** Meaning 'entrustment of the head', this ceremony formally links a novice (*tāleb*) to a spiritual master (*pīr*) from a Sayyed lineage.³⁰ It involves

breaking a nutmeg over the novice's head as a symbol of the bond and the Pir's commitment to guide the disciple.³⁰

- **Other Practices:** While details are sparse in the provided materials, other practices may include specific forms of fasting, pilgrimage to holy sites like the tomb of Sultan Sahak in Perdīvar³⁰, and possibly *Dekr* sessions involving handling burning coals, derived from Sufi practice.³⁰

Social Organization

Yarsani society is traditionally structured around hereditary roles and lineages:

- **Hereditary Distinction:** A fundamental division exists between the laity (*Morid* or *ṭāleb*) and the hereditary priestly class of Sayyeds.²⁹
- **Sayyed Lineages (*Khāndān*):** The Sayyeds are organized into lineages, traditionally numbered at twelve, believed to descend from important figures in the religion's history.²⁹
- **Pir-Morid Relationship:** Every Yarsani must be affiliated with a *Pir* (spiritual guide), who must be a Sayyed from a specific lineage.²⁹ This relationship is hereditary; Sayyeds inherit their followers, and communities often have long-standing ties to a particular *khāndān*.²⁹ The Pir is responsible for the spiritual well-being and guidance of their Morids. This structure, emphasizing inherited spiritual authority, provides strong group cohesion but may also limit individual religious interpretation and social mobility within the hierarchy, contrasting with the "voluntary" adherence described in the modern Zoroastrian revival.¹⁴
- **Lack of Centralization:** Despite these shared structures, the Yarsan lack a single, unified central organization, being divided among various ethnic, tribal, and regional groups.³⁰

Demographics, Distribution, and the Kaka'i Designation in Iraq

Estimating the Yarsani population is notoriously difficult due to the community's tradition of secrecy, lack of official recognition in state censuses, and ongoing pressures.¹⁸ Estimates vary dramatically:

- Total population figures range from one to five million⁷, though the upper end seems unlikely.
- Estimates for Iran typically range from over half a million to one million.²⁸
- Estimates for Iraq (where they are known as Kaka'i) are also varied: 300,000+ in Iraqi Kurdistan³⁵; community/activist estimates between 110,000 and 200,000¹⁸; KRG estimates ranging from 110,000 to 250,000 across different reports¹⁸; US State Department reports citing 110,000-150,000.³¹ An estimate of 5 million Kaka'is in Iraq³⁸ appears highly inflated compared to other sources. A reasonable synthesis suggests a Kaka'i population in Iraq likely between 100,000 and 200,000.

Yarsanis are distributed across western Iran (provinces of Kermanshah, Lorestan, Ilam, Hamadan, West Azerbaijan, and Tehran region)⁷ and northern/eastern Iraq (areas southeast of Kirkuk, the Ninewa plains near Daquq and Hamdaniya, Diyala province, and parts of Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Halabja governorates).⁷

In Iraq, the Kaka'i face specific challenges. They are often considered ethnically Kurdish and speak a Kurdish dialect known as Macho, though some Arabic-speaking communities exist.¹⁸ They suffer from discrimination due to their poorly understood faith and lack official recognition on national identity cards, where they are typically registered as Muslims.¹⁸ Some prefer this misidentification for safety.¹⁸ Kaka'i men are sometimes targeted due to their distinctive large moustaches.¹⁸ They were significantly targeted by ISIS during its advance in 2014, forcing many to flee their villages.¹⁸ Despite these challenges, they gained official recognition as a protected religious group under KRG Law No. 5 of 2015.³⁹

Contemporary Issues and Debates

Several key issues shape contemporary Yarsanism:

- **Relationship with Islam:** The question of whether Yarsanism constitutes a heterodox branch of Islam (specifically Ghulāt Shi'ism) or is an entirely separate religion remains a point of contention both internally and externally.⁷ While clear Islamic (Shi'i and Sufi) influences exist⁷, many Yarsanis reject any connection, emphasizing pre-Islamic roots or Sultan Sahak's teachings as superseding Islam.⁷ This debate is not merely academic but carries significant weight regarding identity, social acceptance, and vulnerability to accusations of heresy.³² The ambiguity reflects both genuine historical syncretism and potentially strategic identity positioning in a majority-Muslim context.
- **Secrecy and Persecution:** Due to historical persecution and ongoing societal pressures, particularly in Iran, many Yarsanis feel compelled to practice *taqiyya* or conceal their faith.⁸
- **Modernization vs. Tradition:** A notable schism exists between 'traditionalists' and 'modernists' who follow newer interpretations stemming from figures like Hajj Ne'matollah and his successors (Nur Ali Elahi, Behram Elahi).²⁹ Traditionalists themselves may be divided, for instance, between the Guran group (rejecting Islamic links) and the Sahne tradition (accepting connections to Shia Islam).²⁹
- **Known Unknowns:** Significant gaps remain in understanding Yarsanism, including precise demographic data, the full scope of esoteric doctrines, detailed pre-Sultan Sahak history, the exact interpretation of concepts like the *zarda-gel* and *kāk-e sīāh*³⁰, and the diversity of practices across different regions and lineages.

III. Kurdish Alevism (Rêya Heqî): The Path of Truth in Anatolia

Alevism represents the largest religious minority in Turkey⁴⁰, and a significant portion of this population consists of ethnic Kurds or Zaza-speakers, primarily concentrated in the eastern and central parts of Anatolia.⁷ Known among themselves often as *Rêya Heqî* (Kurdish/Zazaki: 'The Path of God/Truth') or *Elewîti*²³, Kurdish Alevism possesses distinct historical trajectories, social structures, and cultural expressions compared to Turkish Alevism, while sharing core Alevi tenets. Their identity is marked by a history of marginalization and a contemporary resurgence.

Historical Trajectory

The history of Kurdish Alevi is deeply intertwined with the Dersim region (modern Tunceli province), considered their heartland and sacred land.⁷ During the 16th century, under the relative autonomy of the Emirate of Çemişgezek, the Kurdish Alevi tribes of Dersim flourished and expanded.¹² However, they were often viewed with suspicion by the Ottoman state, labeled as *Kizilbash* (a term originally associated with Safavid supporters, often used pejoratively for heterodox groups) and considered 'heretical'.¹³ This led to centuries of marginalization and periodic persecution.¹³

With the establishment of the Turkish Republic, Kurdish Alevi faced compounded discrimination based on both their Kurdish ethnicity and their Alevi faith.¹² The state pursued policies of assimilation (Turkification and attempted Sunnification) and suppression.¹² This culminated in violent state actions, most notably the Koçgiri Rebellion (1921) and the brutal Dersim Rebellion and subsequent massacre (1937-1938), which decimated the population, destroyed the region, and remains a deep trauma for the community.¹² The closure of Alevi lodges (*dergahs*) and prohibition of religious leaders' activities in 1925 further weakened traditional structures.⁴² Later events like the anti-Alevi pogroms in Maraş (1978), Malatya (1978), and Sivas (1993) reinforced their sense of vulnerability.²³

The political repression following the 1980 military coup paradoxically fueled a resurgence of interest in Alevism, both in Turkey and the diaspora.¹² Many former leftists, disillusioned with purely political paths, turned towards Alevism as a source of cultural and religious identity.⁴³ This "Alevi awakening" ¹³ led to the establishment of Alevi associations, cultural centers (*cemevis*), and publications, fostering a renewed sense of community and political mobilization.¹²

Distinct Identity

Kurdish Alevism exhibits several features that distinguish it from mainstream Turkish Alevism:

- **Language:** Kurdish Alevi primarily speak Kurmanji Kurdish or Zazaki (also Kirmancki/Dimli), languages distinct from Turkish.⁷ Religious ceremonies and hymns are often performed in these languages.¹³
- **Emphasis on Figures:** While sharing reverence for Ali and the Twelve Imams, Kurdish Alevi often place greater emphasis on the 16th-century rebel poet Pir Sultan Abdal as a central religious symbol, whereas Turkish Alevi tend to focus more on the 13th-century saint Haji Bektash Veli.²³
- **Ocax System:** The specific sacred lineages (*ocax*) recognized by Kurdish Alevi differ from some Turkish Alevi lineages and were notably absent from the 13th-century *Vilayetname* associated with Haji Bektash.²³ Kurdish Alevi may also attribute more semi-deific characteristics to their lineage leaders (*pirs*).¹²
- **Nature Veneration:** Beliefs and practices appear more deeply rooted in the veneration of natural elements and specific sacred landscapes, particularly in the Dersim region.¹²
- **Relationship to Islam:** While many Alevi identify as Muslims following a mystical (*bāṭenī*) path ¹⁹, a significant segment of Kurdish Alevi, especially from Dersim, reject any connection to Islam and view *Rêya Heqî* as an older, distinct faith.⁷

- **Claimed Links to Other Traditions:** Some Kurdish Alevis perceive connections between their beliefs and those of Yarsanism and Yazidism, suggesting shared roots in an ancient Kurdish or Iranian religious milieu.⁷

The question of origins remains debated. While early Turkish nationalist scholarship (influencing figures like Irène Mélikoff initially) emphasized pre-Islamic Turkic shamanistic roots⁴³, others propose ancient Kurdish/Iranian origins, sometimes linking to Zoroastrianism or Mazdaism.⁷ Some within the community emphasize a distinct Zaza identity tied to language.¹² This internal diversity and the intersecting identities of being Kurdish and Alevi create a complex cultural sphere.¹²

Core Beliefs

Shared Alevi tenets form the foundation, often with specific Kurdish interpretations:

- **Ali and the Twelve Imams:** Reverence for Ali ibn Abi Talib as the rightful successor to Prophet Muhammad and the first Imam, along with the subsequent eleven Imams descended from him, is central.¹³
- **Mystical Interpretation:** Alevism emphasizes the inner, mystical meaning (*bāṭen*) of the Quran and Islamic teachings over literalist interpretations (*zāhir*).⁴⁸ The concept of the "Four Doors and Forty Levels" represents a spiritual path towards divine truth.¹²
- **Xizir (Khidr):** This mysterious, saint-like figure holds significant importance, especially for Kurdish Alevis. He is considered an emanation of God or the inner aspect (*batin*) of Ali, possessing spiritual power and acting as a helper in times of need.²³ He is believed to travel between heaven and earth, creating sacred springs (*jiare*) where his feet touch the ground.²³ A specific three-day fast in February is associated with Xizir's annual meeting with Elijah, believed to mark the end of winter.²³
- **Nature Veneration:** As mentioned, natural sites – mountains (like the one associated with Duzgin Bawo), rivers (like the Munzur), trees, rocks, springs, sun, and moon – are considered sacred (*jiare*) and are linked to semi-deific figures or saints.¹² This suggests survivals of pre-Islamic nature worship integrated into an Alevi framework.
- **Humanism:** Alevi philosophy often emphasizes human centrality ("people are the greatest books to be read"⁴⁷), morality over rigid ritualism, and values like tolerance and social harmony.¹²

Practices and Sacred Spaces

Ritual life is distinct from Sunni practice and centers on communal gatherings and sacred sites:

- **Cem Ceremonies:** The *cem* is the primary communal worship service, traditionally held in homes or village squares, but now often in dedicated *cemevis* (Alevi houses of worship/community centers).¹³ Historically closed to non-Alevis (*sırr*, secrecy)⁴⁵, *cems* now sometimes occur publicly.⁴⁵ The ceremony involves:
 - Leadership by a *Dede* or *Pir*.⁴⁵
 - Participation of both men and women together, without segregation.¹⁹
 - Recitation of hymns (*deyiş*, *nefes*) accompanied by the sacred *bağlama* or *saz* (long-necked lute).⁴⁶

- The ritual dance, *semah*.¹⁹
- Communal reconciliation (dispute resolution).⁴⁵
- Sharing of a communal meal (*lokma*).⁴⁷
- Twelve specific services performed by designated individuals.⁴⁷
- **Semah:** An integral part of the *cem*, the *semah* is a devotional, dance-like ritual performed by both men and women, often in pairs or groups.¹⁹ Movements can be symbolic, sometimes mimicking the flight of cranes (*turnalar semahı*).⁴⁴ It is considered an act of worship, a spiritual journey, not mere folklore.¹⁹ In modern urban contexts, *semahs* are often performed by trained youth groups, both within the *cem* and sometimes in secular, public settings, leading to debates about authenticity and representation.¹⁹
- **Sacred Places (Jiare):** Pilgrimage to and veneration of natural sacred sites (*jiare*) is a core practice, especially in Dersim.¹² These sites are visited for prayer, making vows, seeking healing (especially for paralysis or mental issues), and performing ritual sacrifices.¹² Important *jiare* include the Munzur River and the mountain associated with Duzgin Bawo.²³
- **Fasting:** Alevis observe fasts different from the Sunni Ramadan, notably the Muharram fast (commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein) and the fast of Xizir in February.¹⁹

Socio-Religious Structure

Traditional Kurdish Alevi society was largely tribal and organized around a hereditary hierarchy, though this structure has been significantly weakened by modern developments¹²:

- **Ocax System:** Society is structured around sacred lineages (*ocax*), believed to descend from holy figures, often Ali or the Imams.¹² These lineages are often organized along tribal lines, particularly in Dersim.¹³
- **Hierarchy:** Within the *ocax* system, a hierarchy of religious leaders exists:
 - *Murşîd* ('Master/Guide'): The highest rank, holding spiritual and sometimes judicial authority over multiple *Pirs* or regions.¹²
 - *Pîr* ('Elder/Saint'): Spiritual guides connected to specific communities or *talips*. They are believed to possess hereditary sanctity (*keramet*), perform miracles, provide spiritual guidance, and traditionally visited their followers annually to collect contributions (*çıralık*).¹²
 - *Raywer/Rêber* ('Guide/Path-shower'): Practical guides who facilitate rituals, teach religious ethics, prepare individuals for the *cem*, and act as intermediaries between *Pirs* and *talips*.¹² This role is also hereditary within *sayyid* (holy lineage) families.²³
- **Talip ('Seeker/Follower'):** The lay members of the community, who are bound by birth to a specific *ocax* and *Pir* through a sacred bond or oath (*ikrar*).¹²
- **Other Institutions:** Practices like *kirvelik* (a form of ritual kinship or godparenthood, often established across religious lines historically) and *musahiplik* (ritual brotherhood between two married couples) reinforced social bonds.¹²

- **Transformation:** State secularization policies (closing lodges in 1925), massacres, forced displacement, urbanization, and migration have severely disrupted this traditional hereditary structure.¹² While *ocax* lineages still exist, their authority has diminished. In urban and diaspora settings, lay members (*talips*) and elected committees in *cemevis* have gained significant influence in organizing religious life and representing the community.¹²

Demographics and Geographic Focus

Accurate demographic data is unavailable due to the lack of official religious/ethnic census data in Turkey.⁴⁰ Estimates for the total Alevi population vary widely, from 4% (KONDA research⁵⁰) to 25% (some older estimates⁵¹) of Turkey's population, translating to roughly 5-25 million people.⁷

- Estimates for Kurdish/Zazaki-speaking Alevis typically range from one-third⁴⁰ to 20%⁴¹ of the total Alevi population. This suggests a population of perhaps 2 to 5 million, though some argue they form the majority if related groups like Yarsanis are included.⁵⁰ Many Alevi Kurds may also self-identify as Turkish due to assimilation pressures, further complicating estimates.⁴¹
- **Geographic Concentration:** Historically centered in eastern and central Anatolian provinces: Dersim/Tunceli (the only Alevi-majority province⁷), Maraş, Adıyaman, Malatya, Sivas, Elazığ, Erzincan, Erzurum, Bingöl, Muş (Varto), Kars, Kayseri, Çorum, Amasya, Gümüşhane.¹³ Some communities also exist in Afrin, Syria.²³
- **Diaspora:** Significant migration since the 1950s has led to large Kurdish Alevi communities in western Turkish cities (Istanbul, Izmir, Ankara) and Western Europe, particularly Germany (estimated over half a million Alevis total, with large Kurdish contingent⁴⁷), the UK, France, Netherlands, etc..¹²

Modern Transformations

Contemporary Kurdish Alevism is undergoing significant change:

- **Urbanization and Migration:** The shift from rural, isolated communities to urban centers and international diaspora has fragmented traditional social ties and religious practices but also created new spaces for interaction and organization.¹²
- **"Alevi Awakening" and Institutionalization:** The rise of *cemevis*, cultural associations, foundations, and publications since the 1980s/90s provides platforms for religious practice, cultural preservation, and political mobilization.¹²
- **Religion-Making Process:** A conscious effort is underway, particularly among urban/diaspora intellectuals and activists, to redefine and reinterpret Alevism for modern contexts.¹² This often involves emphasizing aspects seen as compatible with modern, secular values (humanism, gender equality, environmentalism, democracy, opposition to political Islam).¹² There's a shift from lineage-based authority towards community-based organizations.¹²
- **Politicization:** Historically, Alevis often aligned with secularist parties (like the CHP) or the political left, seeing them as protection against Sunni conservatism.¹⁹ Many Kurdish Alevis were also prominent in the Kurdish political movement (PKK, later HDP).²³

However, deep-seated distrust between Alevi and Sunni Kurds complicates this relationship.⁴³ Current political demands focus on state recognition of *cemevis* as places of worship, ending compulsory Sunni religious education, and achieving equal citizenship rights.⁴⁶

- **Public Visibility and Representation:** Rituals like the *cem* and *semah*, once secret, are now sometimes performed publicly or staged, leading to internal debates about authenticity, the line between worship and folklore, and how Alevism should be represented to the outside world and the state.¹⁹

The dual marginalization faced by Kurdish Alevi—as Kurds within the Turkish state and the broader Alevi community, and as Alevi within the predominantly Sunni Kurdish society¹²—creates a uniquely challenging position. This complexity fuels internal debates about identity (Turkish vs. Kurdish vs. Zaza vs. distinct Dersimi/Raa Haqi¹²) and results in shifting political alignments and difficulties in achieving unified representation.⁴¹ Furthermore, the profound connection of Kurdish Alevi identity, particularly in Dersim, to specific sacred landscapes (*jîare*)¹² means that environmental threats, such as controversial dam projects in the region¹², are perceived not merely as ecological issues but as direct assaults on their religious heritage and cultural survival.

IV. Zoroastrianism: Ancient Roots and Modern Revival Among Kurds

Zoroastrianism, one of the world's oldest continuously practiced religions, has deep historical roots in the Iranian plateau and surrounding regions, including areas historically inhabited by Kurds.¹⁴ Founded by the prophet Zoroaster (Zarathushtra), it served as the state religion of major ancient Iranian empires like the Medes, Achaemenids, Parthians, and Sasanians, whose territories overlapped with Kurdistan.¹⁴ While the Islamic conquests starting in the 7th century CE led to a gradual decline and conversion to Islam, with Zoroastrianism surviving mainly in isolated communities in Iran and among the Parsis of India¹⁴, recent years have witnessed a surprising and notable revival of interest and conversion to Zoroastrianism among Kurds, particularly in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

Historical Presence and Connections

The precise extent of Zoroastrianism's historical penetration among the ancestors of the Kurds is debated. While the religion became dominant in the Iranian heartlands, some scholars suggest that the 'Zoroastrification' process may not have fully taken hold in the northwestern peripheries, including parts of Kurdistan, where older West Iranian or local beliefs might have persisted.⁷ Nonetheless, the region was under the political influence of Zoroastrian empires for centuries. In modern times, Kurdish nationalism has often invoked Zoroastrianism as the supposed "original" religion of the Kurds, part of an effort to construct a distinct pre-Islamic identity separate from Arab, Turkish, and Persian neighbors.¹⁵ Figures like Abdullah Ocalan, founder of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), explicitly promoted Zoroastrianism as superior to Islam²⁴, and claims that Zoroaster himself was a Kurd are

common in these narratives, though lacking historical consensus.¹⁵

The Contemporary Revival in Iraqi Kurdistan (KRI)

Since approximately 2015, reports have emerged of a growing Zoroastrian community in the semi-autonomous KRI, attracting converts from the local Kurdish Muslim population.¹⁴ This phenomenon is often described not as a direct continuation of ancient practices but as a "new religion"¹⁵ or an "invented tradition"¹⁵, heavily influenced by contemporary factors:

- **Motivations:**

- **Kurdish Nationalism:** A primary driver is the desire to embrace what is perceived as an authentic, ancestral Kurdish faith, thereby reinforcing Kurdish identity and distinguishing it from the Islamic identity of surrounding dominant groups.¹⁵ Leaders of the revival explicitly frame it as a return to Kurdish roots.¹⁵
- **Reaction to ISIS:** The brutality and extremism of the Islamic State (ISIS) from 2014 onwards caused a crisis of faith for some Muslims in the region, leading them to seek alternatives.¹⁴ Zoroastrianism is presented by proponents as a religion of peace, tolerance, human rights, and gender equality, contrasting sharply with ISIS's ideology.¹⁵
- **Legal Recognition:** The passage of Law No. 5 by the KRG Parliament in 2015 was a crucial enabler.⁶ This law officially recognized Zoroastrianism alongside other minority religions, granting freedom of belief and practice and allowing for official representation and the establishment of religious institutions. This legal framework provided the necessary space for the movement to emerge publicly.

Adopted Beliefs and Practices

The Zoroastrianism practiced by contemporary Kurdish converts incorporates core historical tenets alongside modern interpretations and adaptations:

- **Core Beliefs:** The central ethical maxim of "Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds" (*Humata, Hukhta, Huvarshta*) is strongly emphasized.¹⁴ Adherents profess belief in one God, Ahura Mazda.¹⁴
- **Rituals:** Practices include performing five daily prayers, often facing a source of light (sun during the day, fire or other lights at night).¹⁴ A form of ritual ablution (*Wudu*), distinct from Islamic practice, is also observed.¹⁴ A monthly four-day fast, known as Nabur, involves abstaining from meat.¹⁴ Festivals and celebrations are often tied to seasons and nature.¹⁴
- **Ethics and Social Norms:** The religion is presented as promoting a life of goodness, love, and mercy towards others.¹⁴ Marriage between close relatives (up to the fifth degree) is prohibited to prevent hereditary flaws.¹⁴ Monogamy is the norm.¹⁴ It is described as a "voluntary religion," where individuals choose their faith upon reaching adulthood after learning about different options.¹⁴
- **Modern Interpretations:** The revival movement is strongly influenced by modern liberal values, including humanism (focus on human welfare), feminism (evident in women holding leadership roles), and ecologism (respect for nature).¹⁵ Interpretations tend to be liberal; for instance, Pir Luqman, a key figure, reportedly rejects literal belief in

heaven and hell and accepts evolution.¹⁵ There is a marked focus on the Gathas, the hymns attributed to Zoroaster himself, as the primary and sometimes sole authoritative scripture, often disregarding later Avestan texts or Pahlavi commentaries.¹⁵

- **Distinct Kurdish Practices:** Some unique practices have been observed, such as the use of a woolen thread thicker than the traditional Parsi *kusti* (sacred girdle) and the absence of the *sadra* (sacred undershirt).²⁴ The leadership structure involves male and female *pirs*, a term likely borrowed from Sufism and distinct from the traditional Zoroastrian priestly hierarchy (*mobeds*, *ervads*).²⁴ Burial practices may also adapt to local customs rather than adhering to traditional Zoroastrian methods like exposure.¹⁴

The construction of this revived Zoroastrianism appears less as a direct continuation of ancient priestly traditions and more as a modern ethno-religious movement selectively appropriating and reinterpreting Zoroastrian symbols and tenets. The influence of diaspora figures returning with experiences from Europe¹⁵ and the emphasis on modern, progressive values¹⁵ suggest a significant shaping by contemporary global discourses alongside local Kurdish political aspirations.

Organizational Efforts, Estimated Scale, and Recognition Challenges

The movement is primarily centered in the KRI, especially the city of Sulaymaniyah.¹⁵

- **Key Figures and Organizations:** Two main figures and associated groups emerged: Awat Hosamadin Tayib, appointed as the official Zoroastrian representative in the KRG's Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, heads the Yasna organization (founded 2015).¹⁵ Pir Karim Luqman, who trained as a priest (*Hirbad*) in Europe and has ties to the World Zoroastrian Organization (WZO), leads a separate center in Slemani.¹⁵ Reports suggest some tension exists between these leaders.¹⁵
- **Institutions:** An official Zoroastrian temple was opened by Yasna in Sulaymaniyah in 2016, serving as a place for ceremonies and community activities.¹⁵ Libraries and centers for study have also been established.¹⁵
- **Scale:** Estimating the number of adherents is highly challenging. While leaders claim thousands of converts since 2015¹⁵, media and external reports offer widely divergent figures, ranging from 10,000 to as high as 100,000.¹⁵ A major obstacle is the inability for converts to officially register as Zoroastrians on Iraqi national identity documents; they remain legally classified as Muslims.¹⁴ This lack of official individual recognition, despite the KRG's recognition of the religion itself, makes accurate counting impossible and likely contributes to underreporting due to fear of repercussions outside the KRI. The significant uncertainty suggests the revival might be more potent symbolically and among leadership circles than as a mass grassroots movement, or that social pressures still significantly inhibit open identification.¹⁴
- **Challenges:** Beyond the lack of individual legal recognition in federal Iraq¹⁴, converts face fear and social prejudice, especially in Muslim-majority areas outside the KRI, partly due to lingering negative perceptions fueled by ISIS.¹⁴ Misconceptions about the faith persist (e.g., being labeled fire-worshippers).¹⁴ The movement also lacks significant financial support, relying on donations and volunteer clerics, which has led to the

closure of at least one temple.¹⁴ Some conservative elements in Iraqi society view the revival with suspicion, attributing it to foreign agendas aimed at weakening Iraq.¹⁴

The KRG's official recognition and support for the Zoroastrian revival⁶ can be understood within the context of promoting a distinct Kurdish identity and projecting an image of tolerance. By embracing a pre-Islamic, "native" religion, the KRG reinforces its narrative of cultural difference from Arab-dominated federal Iraq and appeals to international norms of minority rights and religious pluralism, potentially bolstering political goals related to autonomy.

Relationship with Global Zoroastrianism

The Kurdish Zoroastrian movement actively seeks connections with established Zoroastrian communities worldwide.¹⁵ Leaders have engaged with organizations and centers in North America and Europe.¹⁵ However, acceptance by global Zoroastrianism varies. While reformist groups and organizations like the WZO appear relatively welcoming, traditional Parsi communities in India generally reject conversion altogether, and acceptance among Iranian Zoroastrians can also vary.¹⁵ The Kurdish emphasis on Zoroaster being Kurdish and the movement's strong nationalist underpinnings may also create points of divergence with Parsi or Iranian Zoroastrian perspectives.

V. Judaism: The Legacy of Kurdistani Jews

For centuries, Jewish communities formed an integral part of the diverse ethno-religious tapestry of Kurdistan. Known as Kurdistani Jews (or sometimes historically referred to as Assyrian Jews by those disputing the term "Kurdish"⁵⁵), their history in the region stretches back potentially to antiquity, ending abruptly for most with mass emigration in the mid-20th century. Today, their legacy resides primarily within the vibrant community they established in Israel, which maintains strong cultural ties to its Kurdistani origins.

Historical Communities in Kurdistan

Jewish presence in the mountainous regions of Kurdistan and adjacent areas like Mosul is documented from at least the 12th century, when travelers like Benjamin of Tudela reported around 100 Jewish settlements.⁵⁶ Communities thrived in towns such as Mosul, Amadiya, Zakho, Erbil, and others across the territories now part of Iraq, Iran, and Turkey.⁵⁵ They lived largely as distinct ethno-religious communities⁵⁶, often engaged in trade, crafts, and agriculture.⁵⁵

Their primary vernacular was a cluster of unique Judeo-Aramaic dialects (such as Lishana Deni, Lishanan Didan), remnants of the Aramaic language that once dominated the Middle East.⁵⁵ Hebrew served liturgical purposes, following the Mizrahi tradition.⁵⁶ Interaction with neighbors necessitated knowledge of local Kurdish dialects (mainly Kurmanji), Arabic, or Turkish.⁵⁵

The relationship with their Muslim Kurdish neighbors is often described as generally peaceful coexistence.⁵⁵ Kurdistani Jews lived under the traditional tribal system, often relying on the protection of local Kurdish chieftains (Aghas).⁵⁶ However, this relationship was complex; while some accounts emphasize harmony and mutual respect⁵⁵, others document instances of

exploitation, abuse, and precarious dependency, particularly under certain Aghas.⁵⁵ This suggests that experiences varied significantly depending on location, time period, and specific power dynamics, cautioning against overly romanticized or uniformly negative portrayals.

A remarkable figure from this history is Asenath Barzani (1590-1670). Daughter of a prominent rabbi, she became renowned for her profound knowledge of Jewish law, mysticism (Kabbalah), and scripture. After her husband's death, she headed the prestigious yeshiva in Amadiya (Iraqi Kurdistan), earning the rare title of *tanna'it* (female Talmudic scholar) and recognition as a leading Torah instructor in Kurdistan. She was also a noted poet in Hebrew.⁵⁶

Emigration

While small-scale migration to the Land of Israel (Palestine) occurred over centuries, beginning as early as the 16th century with scholars settling in Safed⁵⁶ and continuing in trickles through the 19th century⁵⁷, the vast majority of Kurdistan Jews left their homeland in a mass exodus during the mid-20th century, primarily in the early 1950s.⁵⁵ This dramatic departure was driven by a confluence of factors:

- **Deteriorating Conditions:** The rise of Arab nationalism, the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, and the subsequent Arab-Israeli war created an increasingly hostile environment for Jews across the Middle East, including Iraq.⁵⁵
- **Iraqi State Policies:** The Iraqi government enacted laws stripping Jews of their citizenship and freezing their assets, effectively forcing them to leave.⁵⁵ Many were permitted to leave only on condition of relinquishing citizenship and property, pledging never to return.⁵⁷
- **Violence and Fear:** Events like the Farhud pogrom in Baghdad (1941) and a series of bombings targeting Jewish sites in Baghdad in the early 1950s instilled fear and uncertainty.⁵⁵ The growing influence of Nazi propaganda in Iraq also contributed.⁵⁵
- **Zionism:** The Zionist movement, active among some Kurdistan Jews since the early 20th century⁵⁶, offered the promise of a national homeland and refuge.

The culmination of these pressures led to **Operation Ezra and Nehemiah** (1951-1952), a massive airlift operation, largely funded by international Jewish organizations, that transported approximately 120,000 Iraqi Jews, including the bulk of the Kurdistan Jewish population from Iraq, to the newly established State of Israel.⁵⁵ Kurdistan Jews from Iran and Turkey also emigrated to Israel in large numbers during the same period.⁵⁶ This near-total transfer marked a dramatic end to millennia of Jewish life in Kurdistan, highlighting the profound impact of modern nation-state formation and regional conflict on long-established minority communities.

Contemporary Presence: The Community in Israel

Today, the overwhelming majority of Kurdistan Jews and their descendants reside in Israel.⁵⁶

- **Population:** Estimates place their number between 150,000 and 300,000.⁵⁵ A significant portion, perhaps half, lives in Jerusalem, with others settling in over 30 agricultural villages they founded across the country.⁵⁵
- **Integration and Identity:** While facing initial challenges integrating into Israeli society,

including cultural differences and the broader marginalization experienced by Mizrahi Jews (Jews from Middle Eastern and North African backgrounds) in the early state period⁵⁷, Kurdistanis Jews have largely integrated, adopting Hebrew as their primary language.⁵⁵ However, they have actively maintained a distinct cultural identity.

- **Cultural Preservation:** Strong efforts are made to preserve their unique heritage. The **Saharane festival**, traditionally celebrated after Passover in Kurdistan, has been revived and adapted in Israel, typically held during the intermediate days of Sukkot.⁵⁵ It serves as a major public celebration featuring traditional Kurdish Jewish music, dance, food, and storytelling, connecting generations to their roots.⁵⁵ The adaptation of the festival's timing to avoid overlap with the Moroccan Mimouna festival highlights a conscious effort to maintain distinctiveness within the broader Mizrahi context.⁵⁷ Other cultural elements like cuisine and music (popularized by artists like Itzik Kala⁵⁵) remain vital.⁵⁷ There are ongoing efforts to establish heritage foundations and museums.⁵⁷ This demonstrates the resilience of cultural identity, which can be actively preserved and adapted even after displacement and integration into a new national society.
- **Nostalgic Ties and Political Engagement:** The first generation often retains strong nostalgic ties and fond memories of Kurdistan.⁵⁷ The community in Israel remains politically engaged regarding Kurdish affairs, notably showing strong support for Kurdish independence during the 2017 KRI referendum.⁵⁵ Organizations exist to foster Kurdish-Israeli relations, and there have been instances of Muslim Kurds visiting Israel for events like the Saharane, indicating efforts towards renewed connection.⁵⁵

Heritage and Memory in Kurdistan

With the mass emigration, Jewish communities effectively ceased to exist within Kurdistan itself.⁵⁶ Left behind are memories, some remaining heritage sites (like the "Jewish Fountain" in Mardin, Turkey⁵⁷), and accounts of local Kurds mourning the departure of their Jewish neighbors and, in some cases, maintaining their synagogues.⁵⁶ The reconstruction of memory, such as maps of former Jewish neighborhoods like in Erbil⁵⁷, plays a role in preserving the connection to the lost homeland.

VI. Christianity and the Kurds: Coexistence, Conversion, and Complexity

The relationship between Christianity and the Kurds is multifaceted, encompassing the long history of indigenous Christian communities residing in lands overlapping with Kurdistan, and the more recent phenomenon of ethnic Kurds converting to Christianity. This history is marked by periods of coexistence and mutual support, but also by significant conflict, persecution, and demographic shifts.

Historical Christian Peoples in Kurdish Lands

Christianity has ancient roots in Mesopotamia and Anatolia, regions where Kurdish populations later became prominent.

- **Indigenous Communities:** The most significant historical Christian presence is that of

the indigenous Assyrians (including those affiliated with the Chaldean Catholic Church, Syriac Orthodox Church, Syriac Catholic Church, and the Assyrian Church of the East).¹⁷ Descendants of the ancient Assyrians, their presence in northern Mesopotamia (Assyria) predates both the arrival of Kurdish tribes and the advent of Islam.¹⁷ Assyria became a major center for Eastern Rite Christianity from the 1st century CE onwards.⁶⁰ Armenians also constitute an ancient Christian people with a long history in Anatolia and the Caucasus, bordering and overlapping with Kurdish areas.⁶²

- **Shared Geography and Complex Relations:** These Christian groups have historically lived alongside, among, or in close proximity to Kurdish populations.³ Interactions have been complex and varied over time. There are documented instances of coexistence and even mutual aid; for example, the *kirîv* relationship (a form of ritual sponsorship or godparenthood) sometimes existed between Yezidis and Armenian Christians or Muslim Kurds⁵, and some Kurds provided shelter to Armenians during the Armenian Genocide.¹⁶ However, the historical narrative is also fraught with conflict. Kurdish tribal expansion over centuries often occurred into territories previously inhabited by Assyrians and Armenians, sometimes involving violence and displacement.¹⁷ Critically, Kurdish tribes, sometimes acting independently and sometimes alongside Ottoman forces, played a significant role in massacres targeting Christian populations. Notable examples include the massacres of Assyrians led by the Kurdish chieftain Badr Khan Bey in the 1840s¹⁷ and the participation of Kurdish irregulars and tribes in the systematic violence against Armenians and Assyrians during the genocides of World War I.⁵ This history of violence and subordination alongside periods of coexistence creates a deeply ambivalent legacy.

Ethnic Kurdish Christians

A more recent development is the conversion of ethnic Kurds from Islam to Christianity.

- **Conversion Trends:** This phenomenon appears to have gained visibility primarily in recent decades, particularly following regional conflicts and the rise of extremist groups like ISIS.¹⁶ Converts predominantly join Evangelical denominations.¹⁶
- **Motivations:** Reasons for conversion vary. Some reports link it to disillusionment with political Islam or the violence perpetrated by groups like ISIS.²⁵ Personal experiences, such as the conversion of Pastor Nihad Hassan while imprisoned in Syria¹⁶, also play a role. Exposure through international aid organizations, media, and diaspora networks may also contribute.
- **Communities and Churches:** Small communities of Kurdish Christians have emerged, notably in the relatively safer environments of the KRI (cities like Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Dohuk) and Northeast Syria (AANES region – Qamishli, Kobani, Amouda).¹⁶ Significant numbers of Syrian Kurdish Christians have also sought refuge in Lebanon.¹⁶ Specific Kurdish-language evangelical churches have been established to serve these communities.¹⁶ The total number globally is estimated to be low, likely in the tens of thousands.¹⁶ This emergence of Kurdish converts adds a new layer to the region's religious demography, distinct from the historical Assyrian and Armenian Christian

presence.

Current Status and Challenges

Both historical Christian communities and recent Kurdish converts face significant challenges:

- **Decline of Indigenous Christians:** The indigenous Christian populations of Iraq, particularly Assyrians, have suffered a catastrophic decline in numbers since the late 20th century, accelerating dramatically after the 2003 US-led invasion and the rise of ISIS.³⁷ Violence, targeted persecution, economic hardship, and emigration have reduced their numbers from potentially over a million pre-2003 to perhaps fewer than 150,000-250,000 today.³⁷ Many are internally displaced, often within the KRI.⁶⁰
- **Persecution of Converts:** Ethnic Kurdish converts face extreme danger, particularly from Islamist extremists who view them as apostates.¹⁶ This threat is acute in areas controlled by Turkish-backed militias in Syria (like Afrin), where converts have been specifically targeted, arrested, and charged with apostasy.¹⁶ The lack of legal recognition for conversion from Islam in most Middle Eastern states creates ongoing difficulties regarding personal status matters like marriage and inheritance.¹⁶
- **Situation in KRI and AANES:** These Kurdish-administered regions offer significantly greater security and religious freedom compared to federally controlled Iraq or other parts of Syria.⁶ The KRG's Law No. 5 formally protects Christian minorities⁶, and the AANES constitution guarantees freedom of worship and even allows legal change of religion.¹⁶ These regions have served as crucial refuges.¹⁶ However, challenges persist. Assyrian groups within the KRI have reported facing "Kurdification" policies, political marginalization, economic pressures, and disputes over land historically belonging to Assyrians.⁶⁰ In Northeast Syria (AANES), the constant threat of Turkish military action and associated extremist groups remains a major source of insecurity for all residents, including Christians.¹⁶ The religious freedom provided in these regions, while real, exists within specific Kurdish political frameworks. This tolerance may serve the political interests of Kurdish authorities seeking international legitimacy and projecting an image of pluralism⁶, but concerns remain about underlying pressures, particularly for non-Kurdish minorities.⁶⁰ The long-term sustainability of this freedom, especially for vulnerable converts, depends heavily on regional stability and the continued political will of the authorities.
- **Inter-Communal Relations:** Efforts are made, particularly in AANES, to foster peaceful coexistence among diverse groups, including Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian, Armenian, and Yazidi communities, with representation in administrative structures.¹⁶ The KRG also promotes a narrative of tolerance.⁶ However, historical grievances and contemporary competition for resources or political influence can still lead to tensions, as suggested by allegations of Shabak militia encroachment on Christian properties in the Ninewa Plain.⁶³

VII. Other Minority Traditions and Syncretic

Expressions

Beyond the more widely recognized minority religions, the Kurdish landscape hosts other distinct groups and syncretic phenomena, further illustrating the region's complex religious history. Shabakism stands out as a notable example, while brief mentions of Feyli Kurds and the controversial "Yazdânism" hypothesis warrant attention.

Shabakism

The Shabak are an ethno-religious minority residing primarily in dozens of villages on the Nineveh Plains, east of Mosul in northern Iraq.⁷

- **Identity:** Their ethnic identity is contested; some identify as a distinct group, while others consider themselves Kurds, Arabs, or Turkmens.²⁰ Their distinct cultural traditions and language, Shabaki (considered a branch of the Gorani group of Kurdish languages⁷), differentiate them from surrounding Arabs and Kurds.²⁰
- **Religious Beliefs:** Shabakism is a syncretic faith with historical roots traced to the Safaviyya Sufi order, founded by the Kurdish mystic Safi-ad-din Ardabili in the 14th century.²⁰ Over time, their beliefs have evolved. While historically possessing a distinct heterodox identity, the community today largely identifies with mainstream Islam: approximately 70% identify as Twelver Shia Muslims, and the remaining 30% as Sunnis (mostly Shafi'i like Kurds).⁷ Despite this shift towards orthodoxy, Shabak practice retains unique elements. They combine aspects of Sufism with a belief in a divine reality that transcends literal interpretations of the Quran or Sharia law.²⁰ Some external accounts note practices differing from orthodox Islam, such as unique prayer or fasting observances, and the ritual use of alcohol.²⁰ There are also reports of syncretic practices involving pilgrimage to Yazidi shrines and incorporating elements resembling Christian confession.²¹
- **Practices and Texts:** Shabak religious life involves spiritual guides known as *Pirs* or *Murshids*, who mediate divine power and lead rituals, operating under a supreme leader called the *Baba*.²⁰ A key element is the reverence for the poetry of Shah Ismail I (founder of the Safavid dynasty, who wrote under the pen name Khatai), whose poems are recited during religious gatherings.²⁰ Their primary sacred text is the *Buyruk* (also *Kitab al-Manaqib* or 'Book of Exemplary Acts').⁷ Significantly, this text is written in an Iraqi Turkmen dialect of Turkish, not Shabaki or Kurdish, reflecting historical connections perhaps related to the Turkoman Qizilbash origins of the Safavid movement.²¹
- **Challenges:** The Shabak have historically faced discrimination and been regarded as a lower social class.²⁰ They were severely targeted by ISIS, suffering massacres, kidnappings, displacement, and the marking of their homes.²¹ Living in the contested territories of the Nineveh Plain, they are caught in the political and territorial disputes between the Iraqi central government and the KRG, as well as facing pressures related to Arabization and Kurdification efforts.²² Internal divisions regarding ethnic identity (Arab vs. Kurd) also exist.²² Recent reports suggest tensions with neighboring Christian communities over land and influence, allegedly involving Shabak-affiliated Popular

Mobilization Forces (PMF) brigades.⁶³ The Shabak case vividly illustrates the extreme fluidity and contested nature of ethno-religious identity in the region, shaped by historical Sufi roots, shifts towards mainstream Islam, linguistic complexity (Shabaki vernacular vs. Turkmen sacred text), and intense contemporary political pressures.

Brief Notes on Other Groups

- **Feyli Kurds:** This group, primarily residing in the border areas between Iraq and Iran (especially Diyala, Wasit, Maysan governorates, and Baghdad), speaks a distinct Southern Kurdish dialect (Feyli). Religiously, they are predominantly Twelver Shia Muslims.⁷ They are recognized as a minority component in KRG Law No. 5³⁹ and faced severe persecution under the Ba'athist regime in Iraq, including mass deportations and stripping of citizenship. While religiously aligning with mainstream Shia Islam, their distinct linguistic and cultural identity, coupled with a history of persecution, marks them as a specific minority group within the broader Kurdish context.
- **Haqqa / Khaksar Sufi Traditions:** These Sufi traditions are mentioned as being present among religious minorities in Kurdistan.⁵ The Khaksar order is a known dervish order with roots in Iran, characterized by syncretic practices. The Haqqa might refer to groups related to the Ahl-e Haqq (Yarsan) or other esoteric Sufi streams. Their specific presence and practices among Kurds require more detailed investigation beyond the scope of the provided sources.
- **Mandaeans and Baha'is:** While listed among minorities present in Iraq and the KRI⁸, these groups (Mandaeans being an ancient Gnostic religion, Baha'is originating in 19th-century Persia) are not specifically associated with Kurdish ethnicity, though individuals may reside in Kurdish areas.

The "Yazdânism" Hypothesis

A concept that frequently appears in discussions of Kurdish minority religions is "Yazdânism" or the "Cult of Angels."

- **Concept:** Proposed primarily by scholar Mehrdad Izady in the early 1990s²⁷, Yazdânism posits the existence of an ancient, pre-Islamic, monotheistic "Aryan" religion native to the Kurds and other Zagros peoples. Izady argues this original faith is the common ancestor of modern Yazidism, Yarsanism, and Alevism.²⁷ He highlights shared features like the belief in seven divine beings (the Heptad or *heft sirr*), reincarnation, reverence for avatars (*bâbâ*), and a fundamental divergence from Semitic Abrahamic traditions.²⁷
- **Shared Elements:** Proponents point to undeniable similarities between Yazidism, Yarsanism, and sometimes Alevism: the concept of a divine Heptad²⁵, the doctrine of reincarnation⁸, syncretic blending of pre-Islamic and Islamic elements⁷, and esoteric interpretations.²⁸
- **Scholarly Critique:** While the striking similarities between Yazidism and Yarsanism are widely acknowledged by scholars, often attributed to a shared ancient West Iranian religious substratum distinct from mainstream Zoroastrianism⁷, Izady's specific "Yazdânism" model is largely rejected within mainstream academia.²⁵ Critics like Richard Foltz and Ziba Mir-Hosseini dismiss it as an "invented religion" or "fabrication".²⁷ They

argue that the theory is driven more by contemporary Kurdish nationalist aspirations than by rigorous historical evidence, that it imposes a false unity onto diverse and evolving traditions, and that it downplays or ignores significant and undeniable influences from Islam (particularly Sufism and Shi'ism).²⁵ The tendency for religious traditions to become more diverse, rather than converging, as one goes further back in time also challenges the notion of a single proto-religion.²⁵

- **Significance:** Despite academic skepticism, the Yazdânism concept has gained considerable traction, particularly within Kurdish nationalist circles and popular discourse.²⁷ Its appeal likely lies in its ability to provide a unifying, ancient, and distinctly non-Islamic origin story for several disparate Kurdish minority groups. It offers a powerful narrative framework for asserting a unique Kurdish heritage predating and separate from the dominant surrounding cultures, fulfilling a political and cultural need for historical depth and unity, even if it simplifies complex historical processes and syncretic realities.

VIII. Comparative Synthesis: Shared Threads and Divergent Paths

Examining the diverse minority religious traditions associated with the Kurds reveals a fascinating tapestry of shared elements, syncretic adaptations, and distinct trajectories. While each group – Yarsanism, Kurdish Alevism, the modern Zoroastrian revival, Kurdistanism, Judaism, Kurdish Christianity, and Shabakism – possesses unique features, comparative analysis highlights recurring themes in their theological frameworks, ritual practices, social structures, and relationship with Kurdish identity.

Syncretism and Influences

A dominant characteristic across several groups (Yarsanism, Alevism, Shabakism, and arguably historical Yazidism) is syncretism – the blending of beliefs and practices from multiple sources.⁷

- **Islamic Layers:** Influences from Islam, particularly mystical Sufism and heterodox (Ghulāt) Shi'ism, are evident in terminology (Pir, Murshid, Baba, Sayyid), organizational structures resembling Sufi orders (*tariqas*), reverence for Ali (though varying in degree), and certain ritual forms (like the *jam/cem*).⁷
- **Pre-Islamic Substratum:** Many scholars posit an underlying layer derived from ancient West Iranian or Mesopotamian beliefs, predating or diverging from orthodox Zoroastrianism.⁷ This is suggested by shared motifs like angelology (the Heptad), reincarnation, and perhaps nature veneration elements prominent in Alevism.⁷
- **Other Traces:** Possible influences from Christianity (e.g., Shabak confession²¹) or Gnosticism⁷³ are sometimes mentioned but often remain speculative.

The varying degrees to which these groups integrate or reject Islamic elements demonstrate diverse strategies for minority survival and identity negotiation in a predominantly Muslim region. Shabakism shows a trend towards assimilation into mainstream Shia Islam.²⁰ Yarsanism and Alevism maintain ambiguity, with internal debates about their relationship to Islam.⁷ The

Zoroastrian revival consciously defines itself against extremist Islam ¹⁵, while Judaism and historical Christianity maintain their distinct Abrahamic identities.

Common Theological Themes

Despite their differences, several theological concepts recur:

- **Angelology/Heptad:** A belief in seven primary divine or angelic beings is prominent in Yarsanism (*Haft Tan*) and Yazidism, and potentially echoed in related concepts within Alevism.²⁵
- **Reincarnation/Metempsychosis:** The transmigration of souls is a central doctrine in Yarsanism (*dunaduni*) ⁸ and is also found in Yazidism and some Alevi traditions.⁸
- **Divine Manifestations:** The idea of the divine appearing in human form is key to Yarsanism (*mazhariyyat*) ²⁸ and resonates with the Alevi reverence for Ali, the Imams, and their Pirs as embodiments of sanctity.¹²
- **Esotericism:** A distinction between hidden (*bātinī*) and apparent (*zāhirī*) realities, requiring initiation and specialized knowledge, is characteristic of Yarsanism and Alevism.²⁸
- **Dualism:** Concepts of a cosmic struggle between good and evil forces appear in various forms.³⁰

The persistence of these non-Islamic theological motifs across multiple groups lends credence to the idea of a shared, ancient West Iranian religious heritage in the region, even if a unified "Yazdânism" is debatable.⁷

Ritual Parallels and Differences

Ritual life also shows both convergence and divergence:

- **Communal Gatherings:** The Yarsani *jam* ²⁹ and Alevi *cem* ¹³ are structurally similar, emphasizing communal participation, music, shared food, and spiritual leadership.
- **Sacred Music:** Music is central to worship, with specific sacred instruments: the *tanbur* for Yarsanis ²⁸ and the *bağlama/saz* for Alevis.⁴⁶
- **Pilgrimage:** Visiting holy sites is important: Lalish for Yazidis ¹⁰, tombs (like Sultan Sahak's) for Yarsanis ³⁰, natural *jiare* for Alevis.¹² Shabaks reportedly visit both Yazidi and Shia shrines.²¹
- **Initiation:** Formal initiation rites exist, like the Yarsani *sar-sepordan* ³⁰, while the Alevi *cem* also serves initiatory functions.⁴⁵
- **Sacrifice:** Ritual sacrifice is practiced by Yarsanis ³⁰ and occurs at Alevi sacred sites.²³

Social Structures and Kurdish Identity

Hereditary leadership structures are common among Yarsanis (Sayyeds/Pirs), Alevis (Ocax/Pirs), and Shabaks (Pirs/Baba).⁷ This model, possibly integrating pre-Islamic tribal patterns with Sufi lineage concepts, seems to have been particularly resilient in the Kurdish context, fostering group cohesion and transmission of tradition. This contrasts with the more individualistic or conversion-based nature of the modern Zoroastrian revival and Kurdish Christianity.

Kurdish identity and language play a significant role for Yarsanis, Kurdish Alevis, and the Zoroastrian revivalists, often forming a core part of their self-understanding and religious

expression.⁷ Kurdistanis Jews, while speaking Judeo-Aramaic, existed within the Kurdish cultural sphere.⁵⁵ Christianity was historically tied to non-Kurdish groups, though recent conversions alter this.¹⁶ The Shabak identity remains ambiguous, with linguistic ties to Gurani Kurdish but a sacred text in Turkmen.⁷

Comparative Overview Table

To consolidate these comparisons, the following table summarizes key features of the discussed minority religions associated with Kurds:

Feature	Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq/Kaka'i)	Kurdish Alevism (Rêya Heqî)	Kurdish Zoroastrianism (Revival)	Kurdistani Judaism	Kurdish Christianity (Converts)	Shabakism
Est. Origins/Figures	Sultan Sahak (14th/15th C) ²⁸	Dersim focus, Pir Sultan Abdal emphasis ²³	Ancient roots / Modern revival (post-2015) ¹⁵	Ancient communities / Asenath Barzani (17th C) ⁵⁶	Recent conversions (late 20th/21st C) ¹⁶	Safaviyya Sufi roots (14th C), distinct group ~16th C? ²⁰
Core Beliefs Summary	Divine Manifestations (Mazhariyyat), Reincarnation (Dunaduni), Heptad (Haft Tan), Bâtinî/Zâhirî worlds, Syncretic (Ghulât/Sufi/Iranian?) ²⁸	Reverence for Ali/Imams, Xizir, Nature Veneration (Jiare), Bâtinî interpretation, Syncretic (Shî'i/Sufi/Kurdish?) ¹³	Monotheism (Ahura Mazda), "Good Thoughts, Words, Deeds", Humanism, Feminism, Ecologism ¹⁴	Monotheism (Torah/Talmud), Mizrahi tradition ⁵⁶	Trinitarian Monotheism (Bible), Evangelical focus ¹⁶	Syncretic (Sufi/Shia/Sunni/Local?), Divine reality > literal text ²⁰
Key Rituals/Practices	Jam gathering, Tanbur music, Sar-sepordan initiation, Sacrifices (Qorbanî), Pilgrimage ²⁹	Cem gathering, Bağlama/Saz music, Semah dance, Jiare pilgrimage, Xizir/Muharram fasts ¹²	5 daily prayers (facing light), Monthly fast (Nabur - no meat), Seasonal festivals ¹⁴	Sabbath, Festivals (e.g., Saharane adapted), Synagogue worship ⁵⁵	Church services, Baptism, Bible study ¹⁶	Recitation of Shah Ismail's poetry, Pilgrimage (Yazidi/Shia sites?), Pir guidance ²⁰

Primary Texts/Tradition	<i>Kalâm-e Saranjâm</i> (Gorani), Strong Oral Tradition ²⁸	Oral tradition (Kurmanji/Zazaki), <i>Buyruks</i> , Religious poetry (<i>deyiş</i>) ¹³	Gathas focus, Avesta (often secondary) ¹⁵	Torah, Talmud, Oral tradition (Judeo-Aramaic) ⁵⁶	Bible ¹⁶	<i>Buyruk/Kitab al-Manaqib</i> (Turkmen), Oral tradition ⁷
Kurdish Identity Link	Integral; Primarily Kurdish tribes & language (Gorani) ²⁸	Strong regional/linguistic link (Dersim, Kurmanji/Zazaki); Complex relationship ¹²	Claimed Ancestral; Key motivation for revival ¹⁵	Historical/Cultural Sphere; Distinct ethno-linguistic group ⁵⁵	Recent/Conversion; New dimension to Kurdish identity ¹⁶	Ambiguous/Contested; Ethnic identity debated, language link (Gorani/Shabaki) ⁷
Est. Size / Locations	Iran/Iraq: ~1M? (Uncertain: 100k-200k Kaka'i in Iraq) ¹⁸	Turkey: ~2-5M? (Uncertain) / E/C Anatolia, Diaspora ⁵⁰	KRI: 10k-100k? (Highly Uncertain) / Sulaymaniya h focus ¹⁵	Israel: ~200k / Jerusalem, villages ⁵⁵	KRI/NE Syria/Diaspora: ~10k? (Low) ¹⁶	Iraq (Ninewa): ~350k-400k ³⁷
Key Unknowns/Debates	Precise link to Islam, Pre-Sahak history, Esoteric details, Demographics ⁷	Pre-Islamic roots extent, Relation to Islam/Yarsanism/Yazidism, Demographics ⁷	Grassroots depth, Long-term viability, Global acceptance ¹⁴	Details of pre-19th C life, Full nature of Kurd relations ⁵⁵	Long-term community stability, Motivations depth ¹⁶	Precise historical origins, Extent of current syncretism, Ethnic identity consensus ²⁰

(Note: Population estimates are highly approximate and often contested due to lack of official data and varying definitions.)

IX. Gaps in Knowledge and Future Research Directions

Despite growing interest, the study of minority and niche religions among the Kurds remains hampered by significant gaps in knowledge and methodological challenges. These limitations stem from the inherent nature of the communities studied, historical circumstances, and the political sensitivities of the region.

Challenges of Secrecy, Esotericism, and Orality

A primary obstacle is the tradition of secrecy and esotericism prevalent in several groups, particularly Yarsanism, Alevism, and historically Shabakism.⁷ Rooted often in centuries of

persecution and the need for self-preservation (*taqiyya*-like practices), this reticence means that core doctrines and rituals may be reserved for initiates (*bātinī* knowledge) and not readily shared with outsiders. Researchers face difficulties gaining access and trust, and published accounts may only scratch the surface of deeper beliefs.

Compounding this is the heavy reliance on oral tradition for transmitting religious knowledge, interpreting sacred texts, and preserving history.⁷ While providing flexibility and resilience, orality makes historical reconstruction challenging, allows for greater regional variation, and means that much knowledge resides with elders or specific lineages, potentially being lost over time, especially amidst displacement and modernization. The declining literacy in sacred languages like Gorani for Yarsanis further exacerbates this issue.²⁸ These factors are not merely academic inconveniences; they are direct consequences of the historical marginalization and vulnerability that necessitated secrecy and reliance on non-written forms of transmission.⁸

Limitations in Demographic Data

Accurate demographic information for nearly all these groups is severely lacking.⁷ State censuses in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria typically do not collect data on specific religious affiliations beyond broad categories (Muslim, Christian, etc.), or may deliberately misclassify minorities (e.g., Kaka'i registered as Muslims in Iraq

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