

Yarsanism (Ahl-e Haqq / Kaka'i): An In-Depth Examination of Beliefs, Practices, and Contemporary Status

I. Introduction

A. Defining Yarsanism: A Syncretic Religious Tradition

Yarsanism, known predominantly by its adherents as Yarsan (Kurdish: ¹ یارسان), represents a distinct religious tradition with deep roots in the cultural and historical landscape of western Iran and adjacent regions of Iraq. Also commonly referred to as Ahl-e Haqq (Persian: اهل حق, meaning "People of Truth") ¹ or, particularly in Iraq, Kaka'i ("Members of the Brotherhood") ¹, this faith was formally established by the pivotal figure Sultan Sahak in the late 14th century CE.¹ The name Yarsan itself is sometimes interpreted by followers as deriving from *yâr-i sân*, signifying "the companion" or "people of the Sultan" ⁵, although the precise etymology remains a subject of discussion.

The identity of Yarsanism is complex and often contested, both internally among its followers and externally among scholars and neighboring communities. A fundamental point of discussion revolves around its classification: whether it constitutes a unique, independent religious tradition incorporating elements from various sources, or if it should be understood as a heterodox branch or interpretation of Shia Islam.⁶ This ambiguity is reflected in the variety of names applied to the group. Outsiders have historically used terms like Ali-Allahi or Ali-Ilahi ("worshippers of Ali" or "those who deify Ali"), stemming from the Yarsani veneration of Ali ibn Abi Talib as a divine manifestation.¹ However, many Yarsanis reject this label as misleading or derogatory, asserting that Ali, while significant, is not the sole or ultimate focus of their complex theology.¹ Other appellations include Nusayri (a term also associated with another distinct group) ⁵, Tayafasan or Tayefe ("the Clan") ¹⁰, and various regional or tribal identifiers like Goran, Qalxani, Shamloo, Khajawand, Kakavand, or Ser Talebi.¹⁴ Some external labels, such as Shaytanparast ("devil-worshippers") ⁵, are explicitly hostile. The term Ghulat, used in Islamic contexts to denote "extremist" sects (often implying excessive veneration of figures like Ali), has also been applied.² This multiplicity of names and the ongoing debate surrounding its classification underscore a fluid and multifaceted identity, shaped significantly by the interplay between internal self-definition and the pressures and perceptions imposed by dominant surrounding cultures.¹

The faith is undeniably syncretic, weaving together diverse theological and cultural threads.¹ Scholarly analysis points to influences from pre-Islamic Iranian traditions, possibly including Mithraism and vernacular forms of Zoroastrianism or Mazdaism.⁷ Elements reminiscent of

Judeo-Christian traditions are also noted.⁵ Crucially, Yarsanism exhibits strong connections to Islamic mysticism (Sufism), particularly esoteric Bātinī currents¹, and shares features with extremist Shi'ite (Ghulat) traditions.² Specific influences from Noşayrī Ghuluw originating in the lower Tigris and Kārūn river regions during the medieval period are also suggested as part of the oldest doctrinal stratum.² The relative weight and precise nature of these various influences remain subjects of academic investigation.⁶

B. Overview of Geographical Presence and Community

The Yarsani community is primarily concentrated in the western regions of Iran and parts of eastern and northern Iraq.¹ In Iran, their heartlands include the province of Lorestan and the Gūrānī-speaking areas surrounding the city of Kermanshah², encompassing towns like Sahne¹³ and the Sarpol-e Zahab area.⁴ Significant populations are also found in Iranian Azerbaijan⁹, Kurdistan province²², Hamedan²², Ilam²³, Mazandaran (Khajevand community)¹⁴, Qazvin (Kakavand community)¹⁴, Zanjan (Ser Talbi community)¹⁴, near Tehran², and in Klardasht.²² The two principal sanctuaries, the tomb of Bābā Yādgār in Dohab (Dohāb) and that of Solţān Şohāk in Perdīvar, are located within Iranian Gūrānī territory.²

In Iraq, Yarsanis, typically known as Kaka'i, reside mainly in Iraqi Kurdistan¹⁰ and disputed territories. Key locations include the governorates of Kirkuk (particularly the Daquq district)¹³, Diyala (including Khanaqin and Mandali)², Erbil¹³, Sulaimaniyah²⁵, Halabja³, and the Nineveh plains near Mosul (including al-Hamdaniya and the Sārli community near Eski Kalak).¹³

The Yarsani faith is predominantly associated with ethnic Kurds, particularly tribes such as the Guran, Sanjābi, Kalhor, Zangana, and Jalalvand.¹ The Lak⁵ and Shabak¹ communities also have significant Yarsani populations. Many Yarsanis self-identify as Guran, irrespective of the specific Kurdish dialect they speak.²⁴ However, the community is not exclusively Kurdish; there are notable groups of ethnic Turkoman and Azeri Yarsanis in Iran¹ and some Arabic-speaking Kaka'i communities in Iraq.²⁶

Estimating the total number of Yarsanis is challenging due to various factors, including the community's historical tendency towards secrecy and the lack of official recognition in some states.¹ Figures vary widely across sources. Estimates for Iran range from over half a million¹ to one million¹ or even more than two million²⁰, potentially making them Iran's largest non-Muslim minority.²² For Iraq, numbers are often cited as unknown¹ or estimated between 110,000 and 300,000.³ Total population estimates across all regions range dramatically, from around 2-3 million⁴ up to 5 million³ or even higher³², though these larger figures require careful scrutiny. Diaspora communities also exist, notably in Western countries like Sweden and Norway.¹³ The significant uncertainty surrounding demographic figures is itself indicative of the community's marginalized status and the difficulties in obtaining accurate data.¹

C. Note on Historical Secrecy and Sources

Understanding Yarsanism is complicated by a long history of concealment regarding its core doctrines and rituals.⁴ This secrecy has often been a necessary response to external

pressures and persecution, particularly from dominant Islamic authorities and societies in Iran and Iraq.¹ As a result, Yarsanism is sparsely mentioned in older historical religious texts.⁴ This historical discretion makes definitive accounts of its origins, development, and precise beliefs challenging to establish.¹ The tradition relied heavily on oral transmission for centuries³⁵, with sacred texts, known as *kalām*, only gradually becoming accessible in written form to outsiders from the 18th or, more significantly, the 20th century onwards.⁹ Consequently, scholarly understanding has evolved as more textual and ethnographic data has become available. Authoritative sources like the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*³⁷ and dedicated studies by specialists provide crucial information, but the inherent secrecy remains a factor in interpretation. This emphasis on concealment is not merely a historical footnote but appears to be a deeply ingrained characteristic, potentially linked to the esoteric distinction between inner (*bātinī*) and outer (*zāhirī*) realities¹ and affecting the internal transmission and potential variation of religious knowledge.³⁴

D. Report Aims and Structure

This report aims to provide a comprehensive, expert-level overview of Yarsanism, drawing exclusively and meticulously upon the provided source materials. Adhering strictly to the requirement for verifiable citation, every significant piece of information presented will be attributed to its specific source(s). The following sections will systematically explore the religion's origins and historical development, its core theological tenets, sacred texts, primary rituals and practices, social organization, geographical distribution, complex relationship with Islam, and the contemporary status and challenges faced by the Yarsani community.

II. Origins, Historical Development, and Key Figures

A. Tracing Historical Roots: Pre-Islamic, Islamic, and Sufi Influences

The origins of Yarsanism are complex and reflect a long history of religious interaction and synthesis in the Zagros region and surrounding areas. It is widely recognized as a syncretic faith, drawing upon multiple streams of religious thought and practice.¹ Scholarly analysis identifies significant influences from pre-Islamic Iranian religions.¹⁷ Connections to ancient Mithraism³ and various forms of Mazdaism or vernacular Zoroastrianism⁷ are frequently proposed, suggesting a substratum of indigenous Iranian beliefs. The introduction of Judeo-Christian traditions into Kurdistan from the 1st century BCE onwards is also considered a potential contributing factor.⁵

However, the most immediate and demonstrable influences stem from the Islamic milieu, particularly from esoteric (*Bātinī*) Sufism and heterodox or extremist Shi'ism (*Ghulat*).¹ The emphasis on an inner (*bātin*) reality distinct from the outer (*zāhir*) world is characteristic of *Bātinī* thought.¹ The doctrine of successive divine incarnations (*mazhariyyat*) and the veneration of Ali ibn Abi Talib align Yarsanism with *Ghulat* traditions.¹ Specific historical links are suggested to the *Noṣayrī* *Ghuluw* movements prevalent in the lowlands of the lower Tigris and *Kārūn* rivers up until the 16th century, considered part of the oldest stratum of *Ahl-e Haqq*

doctrine.²

The relative importance of these diverse influences is debated among scholars and Yarsanis themselves.⁶ Some emphasize the pre-Islamic Iranian elements, viewing Yarsanism as a continuation of ancient traditions with an Islamic overlay.¹⁷ Others highlight the Sufi and Shi'ite components, seeing it primarily as a development within the broader Islamic mystical and heterodox landscape.⁶ Certain historical periods are seen as particularly formative. Vladimir Minorsky, a pioneering scholar, pointed to the Turcoman Qaraqoyunlu period (mid-15th century) in Azerbaijan, Persian and Arab Iraq, and Kurdistan as a potential cradle for the religion's beginnings, a time marked by intense interaction between Turkish and Iranian cultures.¹⁷ This suggests that Yarsanism's syncretism was not a passive blending but an active historical process, a dynamic negotiation where elements from surrounding cultures were incorporated and reinterpreted to fit within a developing Yarsani framework, possibly reflecting responses to specific historical events or cultural encounters.⁵

B. The Epochs of Yarsani History

Central to the Yarsani worldview is a cyclical conception of history, structured into distinct periods or epochs, known as *Dowre* or *Biyâbas*.⁴ Each epoch is understood as a fundamental repetition of the mythical period of Creation and is characterized by the appearance (*zohur*) of divine manifestations.⁵ While variations may exist, a common framework outlines four major epochs, often described using Sufi terminology:

1. **First Epoch (Shari'at - Law):** This period encompasses the time from Adam and Eve up to the Prophet Muhammad, often referred to as the "Prophet" period.² The divine manifestation is the Creator, Kāvandagār.²
2. **Second Epoch (Tariqat - Path/Doctrine):** This epoch extends from Ali ibn Abi Talib until Shah Khoshin, known as the "Doctrine" period.² Ali is the primary divine manifestation.¹
3. **Third Epoch (Marefat - Gnosis/Mystical Knowledge):** This period spans from Shah Khoshin to Sultan Sahak, termed the "Mystical" period.² Shah Khoshin is the principal manifestation.⁴
4. **Fourth Epoch (Haqiqat - Truth):** Beginning with Sultan Sahak and continuing to the present day, this is considered the epoch of "Truth".² Sultan Sahak is the primary manifestation.¹

According to Yarsani belief, it was only with the advent of the Fourth Epoch, the *Haqiqat*, under Sultan Sahak, that the absolute truth (*haqq*) was fully revealed.² This cyclical view, allowing for successive divine interventions and revelations, provides a theological framework capable of incorporating diverse historical figures and adapting to changing circumstances over time.

C. Sultan Sahak: The Pivotal Figure

Sultan Sahak, also referred to as Sultan Ishaq, Is'hâq, or Sohāk, stands as the central and founding figure of Yarsanism as it is known today.¹ He is believed to have lived and taught in

the late 14th or early 15th century CE.¹ His ministry is associated with western Iran, particularly the Gūrānī-speaking region², and his tomb in Perdīvar, near the Iraq border, remains one of the most important Yarsani sanctuaries and pilgrimage sites.²

Sultan Sahak holds paramount importance in Yarsani theology as the primary divine manifestation (*mazhariyyat*) of the Fourth Epoch, the era of *Haqiqat* (Truth).¹ He is revered as "Sultan Haqiqat" (King of Truth) and "Xawan Karam" (King of Generosity), holding the highest spiritual rank.¹⁴ Yarsani tradition credits him with giving the religion its definitive form, establishing its core institutions and rituals, and renewing the primordial covenant between the divine and creation.² He is considered a descendant of the Barzanji family, a significant Sufi lineage in Kurdistan.³⁶

Narratives surrounding his birth are rich in symbolism and vary in detail. A prominent tradition holds that his mother, Dayarak Rezbar (also known as Khatun-e Rezbar or Ramzbar), was a Kurdish virgin, possibly from the Caf tribe or the priestly Berzencî line.¹ Conception is sometimes described as miraculous, occurring when a pomegranate seed, pecked by a bird, fell into her mouth while she slept under a tree.¹ However, other accounts suggest she was married, though the identity of her husband (a Kurdish man named Şêx Îsa or an Arab Sayyid) and his role, if any, in Sahak's parentage are contested.¹ The belief in a virgin birth is debated even among Yarsani scholars.¹ Traditionalist Yarsanis often view Sultan Sahak not merely as a historical figure but as a superhuman being, an avatar of the Universal Spirit who lived for centuries, possessed mystical powers, and continues to exist as a protective spirit.⁵ The name *Sahâk* itself is speculatively linked by some to *Dhahâk* or *Dahâk*, a title associated with ancient Median rulers.⁵ Some traditions connect Sultan Sahak with the Anatolian Sufi saint Haji Bektash, suggesting Sahak reappeared as Bektash after his disappearance³, although other Yarsani sources contest this identification, viewing Haji Bektash as a prophet rather than Sahak himself.³ These varying accounts concerning such a central figure highlight the internal diversity and potentially competing traditions within the Yarsani community, possibly stemming from different lineage (*khandan*) perspectives or theological interpretations developed over time.¹

D. Other Significant Divine Manifestations and Historical Personages

While Sultan Sahak is pivotal, the Yarsani understanding of divine history encompasses numerous other significant figures, appearing as manifestations (*mazhariyyats*) across different epochs:

- **Ali ibn Abi Talib:** The fourth Caliph of Islam and the first Imam for Shia Muslims, Ali is recognized in Yarsanism as the primary divine manifestation of the Second Epoch (*Tariqat*).¹ His veneration is prominent enough to have led to the external label "Ali-Allahi".¹ However, for many Yarsanis, particularly traditionalists, his role within their broader system is considered relatively minor compared to figures like Sultan Sahak.² Within the concept of the Holy Seven (*Haft Tan*), Ali, along with the Creator (Khâwandagâr) and Sultan Sahak, forms a "Supreme Three".⁵
- **Shah Khoshin:** Regarded as the primary manifestation of the Third Epoch (*Marefat*)⁴,

Shah Khoshin (or Khurshid) is associated with legends set in Lorestan, representing an earlier phase in the doctrine's development in the Iranian highlands.² He is credited with establishing the first pact (*pact*) with the divinity.¹⁰ Some interpretations link him to the ancient Iranian deity Mithras.⁵

- **Baba Yadgar:** A highly revered figure, often considered an incarnation of Husayn ibn Ali, the third Shia Imam and martyr.⁹ His tomb in Dohab (Dohāb), Gūrān territory, is a major Yarsani sanctuary.² He is also listed as one of the *Haft Tan* (Holy Seven) companions of Sultan Sahak in the Fourth Epoch.⁴
- **Haft Tan Figures:** Across the epochs, specific groups of seven figures (one primary, six secondary, or variations thereof) known as the *Haft Tan* embody the divine presence. Key companions associated with Sultan Sahak in the Fourth Epoch include Pir Benjamin (considered the incarnation of Gabriel and preceptor to all Yarsanis), Pir Musi (incarnation of Michael and the recording angel), Mustafa'Dawan or Davodan (incarnation of Azrael, the angel of death), Dawud Koswar (incarnation of David, known as the *Dalil* or guide for all Yarsanis), Baba Yadgar (also called Ahmad or Reza), and Khatun-e Rezbar (Sultan Sahak's mother, the sole female figure in this heptad).¹ Figures associated with earlier epochs draw from Islamic tradition (e.g., Salman, Qanbar, Nusayr in Ali's epoch)¹ or pre-Islamic archetypes (the Archangels in the First Epoch).¹
- **Modern Figures:** In more recent times, Hājj Ne'matollāh Mokri Jeyhunābādi (1871-1920) and his successors, notably Nur 'Ali Elāhi (1895-1974) and Dr. Behram Elahi (b. 1931), emerged as influential figures associated with a "modernist" interpretation or re-articulation of Yarsanism.⁶
- **Other Personages:** Various other figures appear in Yarsani traditions and texts, including Bahlul (associated with the 8th century Caliph Harun al-Rashid)¹⁰, Fazl-e Vali (10th century)¹⁰, Shah Ibrahim (companion of Sultan Sahak and founder of a major *khandan*)⁹, Qirmizi (primary avatar of the Fifth Epoch, possibly linked to revolutionary figures)⁵, and the medieval Kurdish poet Bābā Tāhir, considered a secondary avatar of the Third Epoch.⁵

III. Core Theological Beliefs

A. The Nature of Divinity: Manifestations and the Two Worlds

A cornerstone of Yarsani theology is the belief that the Divine Essence, or Ultimate Truth (Haqq), manifests itself successively throughout history in physical, often human, form.¹ These divine incarnations are known as *mazhariyyat* (singular: *mazhariyyat*), a concept analogous to avatars in Hinduism.¹ Yarsanis believe that in each historical epoch (*dowre*), God reveals Himself through one primary manifestation and several secondary manifestations, often forming a group of seven known as the *Haft Tan*.¹ This concept of divine emanation and incarnation (*hulul*) places Yarsanism in contrast to the strict transcendental monotheism of mainstream Islam.⁷

Complementing the belief in divine manifestation is the cosmological view of two distinct yet interconnected realities: the inner or internal world (*‘ālam-i bātinī*) and the outer or external world (*‘ālam-i zāhirī*).¹ Each realm possesses its own inherent order and governing principles.¹ While human beings are typically only aware of the external world and its rules, Yarsani belief holds that their lives, actions, and ultimate spiritual destiny are fundamentally governed by the hidden laws and realities of the inner world.¹ This inner truth (*bāten*) is not readily perceptible but can be accessed and understood through the study of sacred poems and lore, or directly perceived by spiritually advanced individuals known as "seers" (*didedār*).⁶ This dualistic cosmology, emphasizing an esoteric dimension accessible only through specific means, is identified as a form of Kurdish esoterism, likely shaped by interactions with Bātinī Sufism.¹ An associated concept found in some Yarsani traditions, paralleling beliefs in other Ghulat sects like the Syrian Noṣayrīs, is the idea of God initially appearing within or as a pearl.²

B. Cosmology: Creation, the Pearl, and Cyclical Time

The Yarsani creation narrative provides a foundation for their cyclical understanding of time and divine manifestation. According to this myth, before the existence of the current world, the Universal Spirit or Truth (Haq) resided within a Pearl in a state of Pre-Eternity (referred to as Aza4).⁵ From this primordial state, God first created the Seven Beings, the original *Haft Tan*, to whom control of the world would eventually be entrusted.⁵ Subsequently, God and these Seven Beings gathered in the first primordial "meeting" (*jam*). During this gathering, a celestial bull or deer appeared and was sacrificed. This act caused the Pearl to burst, and from its essence, the phenomenal world came into being.⁵ Some traditions elaborate that the smoke from the burning pearl formed the sky, stars, and clouds, while its matter formed the Earth.¹⁰ This creation event establishes the pattern for subsequent history. The Yarsani view of time is cyclical, not linear.⁴ Each historical epoch (*dowre*) is seen as an essential reenactment or repetition of the original moment of creation, marked by the appearance (*zohur*) of individuals who embody the divine essence (*zāt*) of the primordial beings.⁵ This cyclical framework underpins the doctrine of divine manifestation (*mazhariyyat*) and reincarnation (*donādon*). Yarsani cosmology also includes an eschatological dimension. It is believed that the seven cycles of divine manifestation will culminate in the appearance of a final savior figure, identified with the Islamic concept of the Mahdī or referred to as the Lord of the Time (*ṣāḥeb-e zamān*).² Following this, a Last Judgment, known as *Pardivari* ("the bridge crossing"), will occur, traditionally located in the plains of Šāhrazūr or Solṭānīya.²

C. The Haft Tan: The Holy Heptad Across Epochs

The concept of the *Haft Tan*, literally "The Seven Persons" or "Seven Beings," is central to Yarsani angelology and cosmology.¹ These seven figures are typically understood as the primary companions or secondary manifestations of the Divine Essence in each historical epoch.¹ They are believed to be responsible for governing the affairs of the inner, spiritual realm (*bātinī*).⁴

According to Yarsani tradition, the *Haft Tan* first appeared in their true angelic forms during

the First Epoch of Creation.¹ In subsequent epochs, they manifested through human incarnations.¹ The composition of the *Haft Tan* varies depending on the epoch:

- **First Epoch (Time of the Creator, Kāvandagār):** The secondary manifestations included the archangels familiar from Abrahamic traditions: Gabriel (Jebrā'īl), Michael (Mikā'īl), Israfil (Esrāfīl), and Azrael (ʿAzrā'īl), along with an unnamed female angelic being.¹
- **Second Epoch (Time of Ali):** The manifestations included figures prominent in early Islamic history and Shi'ite tradition: Salman al-Farsi (Salmān), Qanbar, Muhammad (possibly the Prophet, or another figure), Nusayr (variously identified as Ibn Nusayr, Jesus Christ, or Theophobus), and Bahlool. Fatimah, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad, is also included as the incarnation of the female angel.¹
- **Third Epoch (Time of Shah Khoshin):** Figures associated with this epoch include the Sufi poet Bābā Tāher⁵, Shah Fazlullah Veli, Baba Sarhang Dudani, and Baba Naous.¹
- **Fourth Epoch (Time of Sultan Sahak):** This heptad, charged by Sultan Sahak himself, is particularly significant. Its members are Pir Benjamin (regarded as the incarnation of Gabriel and the universal preceptor or *pīr*), Pir Musi (incarnation of Michael, the Recording Angel), Mustafa'Dawan (or Davodan, incarnation of Azrael), Baba Yadegar (also known as Ahmad or Reza, possibly incarnating Husayn), Dawud Koswar (David, known as the universal guide or *Dalil*), and Khatun-e Rezbar (Sultan Sahak's mother, the only female member).¹

It is important to note that while the concept of a heptad is consistent, the exact number and identities of the figures accompanying the primary manifestation can sometimes appear as four helper angels plus a female figure (totaling six including the primary), as described in some sources analyzing specific cycles.² This variation might reflect different traditions or interpretations within the Yarsani community.

D. The Journey of the Soul: Reincarnation (*Donādon*)

A defining doctrine of Yarsanism, setting it apart from mainstream Abrahamic religions, is the belief in the transmigration of the soul, known as *dunaduni* in Kurdish, *donādon*, or *Dun ba Dun* (variously interpreted as "garment to garment" or "oblivion to oblivion"), equivalent to metempsychosis.¹ Yarsanis do not believe death is an end but rather a transition, like a duck diving into water⁷; the soul merely changes its "corporeal garment".²

This belief posits an evolutionary journey for the soul, beginning within inanimate objects, progressing through plant life, then animal forms, before finally entering a human body.⁵ Upon reaching the human stage, the soul embarks on a cycle of 1,001 reincarnations (*Dons*), a process believed to span the 50,000 years allotted to the universe's existence.² Each *Dun* or lifetime is an opportunity for the soul to purify itself through righteous actions and adherence to Yarsani principles.² The ultimate goal of this long pilgrimage is salvation: achieving perfection, becoming a holy being worthy of the highest heavens, and attaining total union with the Universal Spirit (Haq).⁵

Salvation is considered the responsibility of the individual soul; the community or religious

guides offer guidance but cannot ensure another's progress.⁵ Theoretically, perfection could be reached in a single lifetime of exceptional effort.⁵ Conversely, committing sins or ignoring the principles of truth can lead to regression, where the soul might be reincarnated into an animal form or face a harsher human existence in the next life; such regressive lives, or lives ending before 40 days, do not count towards the 1,001 necessary for salvation.⁵ This doctrine provides a framework for understanding suffering, as current life conditions (poverty, illness) are seen as consequences of actions in previous *Dons*.²⁹

This belief in reincarnation fundamentally shapes the Yarsani view of the afterlife, eliminating the concepts of a final, eternal heaven or hell as understood in Islam.⁷ The journey itself is the process of judgment and purification. However, if a soul fails to achieve perfection after 1,001 lives or by the end of the universe's allotted time, it faces a final judgment at the *Pardivari* (bridge crossing).⁵ Some traditions introduce a deterministic element, suggesting that salvation is ultimately reserved for the Ahl-e Haqq, those created from "yellow clay" (*zarda-gel*), while others, created from "black earth" (*kāk-e sīāh* or *Kāk-e siyah*), are eternally damned.² This appears to contradict the emphasis on individual effort and purification through multiple lives, reflecting potential internal tensions or diverse interpretations within the faith regarding free will and predestination.

E. Ethical Foundations: The Four Pillars (Paki, Rasti, Nisti, Reda)

The ethical framework of Yarsanism is encapsulated in four fundamental pillars that guide the conduct and spiritual aspirations of its followers.⁷ These pillars, often invoked in Yarsani sayings and texts, are:

1. **Paki (Purity):** This encompasses both external cleanliness (of body and clothes) and internal purity (of language, thought, and behavior).⁷
2. **Rasti (Truth / Righteousness):** This pillar emphasizes adherence to the right path, truthfulness in speech, honesty in actions, abstinence from falsehood and sin, and living according to the divine will.⁷
3. **Nisti (Nothingness / Inexistence):** This refers to the spiritual goal of annihilating the ego, overcoming pride, selfishness, worldly desires, and lusts in order to attain closeness to or union with God.⁷
4. **Reda (Magnanimity / Generosity / Tolerance):** This principle involves demonstrating generosity, self-sacrifice, serving others, and providing help to fellow human beings.⁷

These four pillars collectively define the Yarsani way of life and system of values.⁷ They represent a distinct ethical code that differs significantly from the Five Pillars of Islam, focusing on internal spiritual states and ethical conduct rather than prescribed ritual actions like daily prayer or pilgrimage in the Islamic sense.⁷ Adherence to these principles is considered essential for the soul's progress through the cycles of reincarnation.

IV. Sacred Texts: The Kalam-e Saranjam and the Yarsani Literary Tradition

A. The Centrality of the *Kalam*: Content and Role

The sacred literature of Yarsanism primarily consists of compositions known as *Kalam* (meaning "speech" or "discourse") or sometimes referred to as *Daftar* (meaning "register" or "manuscript").¹ These texts hold a position of central importance within the faith, believed by adherents to contain divinely revealed narratives and teachings.⁴

The term *Kalām-e Saranjām* ("Discourse of the End," "Discourse of Conclusion," or "Book of Perfection") is frequently identified as the principal holy book of the Yarsani people.¹ It is generally understood to be based on the teachings of Sultan Sahak and to have been compiled in the 15th century.¹ However, recent scholarship suggests that the term *Saranjām* may not have originally denoted a single, unified canonical text.³⁶ Instead, it might have referred more broadly to the final epoch of divine history (*Haqiqat*) initiated by Sultan Sahak, or to the ultimate manifestation of God.³⁶ The emergence of specific comprehensive manuscripts titled *Nāma-y Saranjām*, *Kalām-e Xazāne*, *Dīwān-e Gewre*, or *Serencam* appears to be a result of later collection and canonization efforts, particularly from the 19th century onwards.⁶

Regardless of the specific title, the content of the Yarsani *kalāms* is rich and multifaceted. They preserve the semi-mythical history of the Ahl-e Haqq¹⁵, detailing the successive epochs of divine manifestation associated with key figures like the Creator (Khawandagar), Ali, Shah Khoshin, and Sultan Sahak.² The texts narrate the experiences, deeds, and teachings of these divine avatars and their companions (*Haft Tan*).⁶ They contain instructions for worldly life, ethical principles, cosmological explanations, descriptions of rituals, and collective wisdom passed down through generations.¹⁶ A common belief within the tradition attributes the writing down of these sacred narratives to Pir Musi, the companion of Sultan Sahak identified with the Archangel Michael and the celestial recorder of deeds.⁴ Adherence to the teachings contained within the *kalāms* is considered by Yarsanis to be a prerequisite for belonging to the faith.¹

B. Language, Transmission, and Canonization

The primary language of the oldest and most revered Yarsani *kalāms* is Gorani (also spelled Gurani), including related dialects like Hawrami and Laki.¹ This Gorani is often described as a literary *koine*, a mixed dialect drawing features from various Kurdish linguistic traditions (Hawrāmi, Sorāni, Kalhori) and serving as a prestigious medium for verbal art among eastern Kurds.⁶ However, the active use of spoken Gorani dialects has declined, and few modern Yarsanis possess literacy in this ancestral liturgical language, with Southern Kurdish or Sorani often being their contemporary mother tongues.¹ This linguistic shift creates a potential barrier between the community and its foundational texts.¹ In addition to Gorani, Yarsani religious literature also exists in Azeri Turkic (particularly in Azerbaijan communities), Persian, and other forms of Kurdish.⁶

For centuries, the transmission of Yarsani sacred knowledge was predominantly oral.³⁵ This reliance on oral tradition, combined with the religion's historical secrecy³⁶ and a traditional

reluctance towards committing sacred knowledge to writing ³⁶, significantly shaped the textual landscape. The process of formal canonization faced several obstacles. The decentralized, "rhizomatic" structure of the Yarsani community, organized into multiple spiritual households (*khandan*) with considerable autonomy, hindered the emergence of a single, universally accepted scriptural authority.³⁶ Furthermore, the core theological belief in continuous divine manifestation implies that revelation is potentially ongoing, making the concept of a closed, final canon problematic.³⁶ The inherent variability of oral transmission, known as *mouvance*, also contributed to divergences in textual versions across different communities and performances.³⁶

Beginning in the 19th and continuing into the 20th century, various Yarsani spiritual households, including the Heydari, Jeyhun-ʿAbādi (Elahi), and Shāh ʿIbrāhimi families, undertook significant efforts to collect, transcribe, and compile the oral traditions into written manuscripts.⁶ Figures like Seyyed Bērākah of the Heydari household established institutions for scribing and revising texts.³⁶ However, these parallel efforts resulted in the creation of several distinct collections and textual traditions rather than a single, unified canon accepted by all Yarsanis.³⁶ This transition to written forms also led to a phenomenon described as "cultural diglossia," where the ancient, central *kalāms* in the literary Gorani *koine* became somewhat distinct from newer texts composed in more vernacular dialects, with the language of the older texts often acquiring a sacred, archaic quality requiring specialized interpretation.³⁶ The lack of a fixed, closed canon, therefore, appears not merely as a historical circumstance but as a reflection of Yarsanism's decentralized structure and its fundamental theology of ongoing divine revelation.

C. The *Kalam* in Religious Life and Ritual

The *kalāms* are not static historical documents but living texts integral to Yarsani religious life and practice. They serve as the primary vehicle for transmitting religious knowledge, encompassing both esoteric truths (*bāten*) and mundane guidance (*zāher*).⁶ This transmission often occurs informally within families, through dedicated study within priestly lineages (Sayyeds), and through communal discussion and recitation during religious gatherings.⁶ Rituals, particularly the central *jam* ceremony, are deeply intertwined with the performance of the *kalām*. A specialized figure, the *kalāmkhwān* ("singer of holy poems"), leads the musical dimension of the ritual, chanting or singing excerpts from the sacred texts.⁶ Yarsanis themselves classify their compositions based on their perceived function and sanctity. The most sacred category, *haqqāni* ("related to God"), includes the foundational *kalām* texts (often divided into older *Perdiwari* and later *non-Perdiwari* strata) and the shorter hymns or songs (*nazm*) performed during rituals like the *jam*.⁶ *Perdiwari* texts, linked to Sultan Sahak and earlier epochs, hold greater authority and are typically studied by the learned, recounting divine history and the lives of holy figures.⁶ Later *kalāms* may be linguistically simpler and focus more on devotional emotion.⁶ Other categories include *majāzi* ("virtual" or semi-religious), encompassing epic narratives reinterpreted through a Yarsani lens, and *majlesi* (for worldly gatherings).⁶ The recitation and singing of *kalām* during the *jam*, often

accompanied by the sacred *tanbur*, is considered essential for creating the spiritual atmosphere and facilitating the connection with the divine.⁶

V. Religious Practices, Rituals, and Ceremonies

A. The *Jam* Ceremony: A Communal Ritual of Music and Spirit

The *jam* (meaning "meeting" or "assembly") constitutes the central collective ritual of Yarsanism, serving as a primary expression of communal worship and spiritual connection.⁶ It is typically held in a designated space known as a *jam khana* ("gathering house").⁴ The ceremony adheres to specific requirements and follows a structured format. A minimum of seven male participants is necessary to convene a *jam*.⁶ Participants must prepare themselves through purification (washing hands and face), remove their shoes before entering, cover their heads, and bind their waists with a cloth or belt, symbolizing readiness and submission to the divine.¹⁰

Upon entering the *jam khana*, each participant performs a "hand kissing ceremony," bowing to those already seated as they move around the circle from left to right.⁴⁹ The participants sit in a circle, facing inwards, a formation symbolizing their equality and signifying that the divine presence is at the center of their gathering.⁶ Once the *jam* is formally convened, participants are expected to remain seated and still, not leaving the circle until the ceremony concludes.⁶

An exception is made for the individual(s) responsible for distributing ritual food.³³

A crucial element of the *jam* is the presence and supervision of a Sayyed, a member of the hereditary priestly lineage.⁶ The ritual typically involves the sharing of consecrated offerings.

A bowl of water and some food items (such as sweets, apples, or portions of a sacrificed animal or plant offering) are passed around the circle, and each participant partakes ritually.⁶

Music and chanting form the core of the *jam* experience. Where adherents of other faiths might engage in prayer or listen to sermons, the Yarsanis primarily sing.⁶ A designated *kalāmkhwān* ("singer of holy poems") leads the musical performance, chanting sacred texts (*kalām*) and hymns (*nazm*).⁶ This often involves an alternation between solos by the

kalāmkhwān and communal singing by all participants.⁶ The primary and most sacred instrument used is the *tanbur*, a long-necked lute, whose music is considered indispensable for creating the ritual atmosphere and facilitating the passage into a holy, communal state.¹

The ceremony often involves rhythmic clapping and a gradual increase in musical tempo, which can culminate in an altered or ecstatic state of consciousness for the participants, before slowing down towards the conclusion, which is formally announced by the presiding Sayyed.⁶ The *jam* thus serves as a powerful medium for uniting the community, transmitting religious knowledge and emotion, and seeking connection with the divine, which is believed to be present during the ritual.⁶

Table V.A: Key Elements of the Jam Ceremony

Element	Description	Snippet References
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Purpose	Create holy communal experience; connect with divine presence; transmit religious knowledge/emotion through music/song.	⁶
Participants	Minimum 7 males; supervised by Sayyed; led musically by <i>kalāmkhwān</i> . (Women generally excluded from direct participation in the circle).	⁶
Setting	Seated circle in <i>jam khana</i> (gathering house).	⁴
Preparation	Purification (washing); heads covered; waists bound; shoes removed before entry.	¹⁰
Key Actions	Hand kissing upon entry; ritual sharing of food/water; <i>tanbur</i> music; singing (<i>kalām</i> , <i>nazm</i>); clapping; potential ecstatic experience; remaining seated throughout.	⁶
Sacred Instrument	<i>Tanbur</i> (long-necked lute), exclusively used for religious (<i>haqqānī</i>) songs during the <i>jam</i> .	¹

The *jam* ceremony, through its specific structure, actions, and emphasis on music, functions as a ritual embodiment of core Yarsani theological concepts. The circular seating arrangement reflects the ideals of equality and the centrality of the divine.⁶ The shared partaking of food and water reinforces communal bonds. Most significantly, the music, especially the *tanbur*'s sound, is not merely decorative but serves as a vital conduit to the inner, spiritual world (*bātinī*), facilitating a direct, emotional, and potentially ecstatic experience of the sacred.⁶ This reliance on music as a primary medium for religious expression and connection distinguishes Yarsanism markedly from neighboring Islamic traditions, where the role of music in worship is often viewed with more ambivalence or restriction.⁶

B. Entering the Faith: The *Sar-sepordan* Initiation Rite

Formal entry into the Yarsani community is marked by the crucial initiation rite known as *sar-sepordan*, meaning "entrustment of the head".² An alternative name for the ceremony is *jawz-e sar šekānen*, "breaking a nutmeg [as a symbol] of the head".⁴⁹ This rite is considered a fundamental institution, practiced across all Yarsani branches (*khandan*) and rooted in religious narratives suggesting even God underwent this process.⁴⁹ Its primary purpose is to formally initiate an individual, linking the neophyte (*tāleb* or *morid*) to a specific spiritual

master (*pīr*) and signifying their commitment to the Yarsani path.²

The *sar-sepordan* ceremony must take place within the context of a *jam*.⁴⁹ Participants include the initiate, who may be a child born into the community (*čekida*) represented by an adult family member (*wakil*), or an adult outsider wishing to join (*časbida*).⁴⁹ Adult males must be present themselves, whereas adult females are typically represented by a male proxy, as women are generally not permitted within the *jam* circle during initiation.⁴⁹ Other key participants are the Sayyed presiding over the *jam* (*sayyed-e sar-jam*), the initiate's designated *Pir* (from a Sayyed family), a *Dalil* ("guide" from specific lineages, representing the angel Dawud), the *Dalil*'s representative (*khalifa*), the *Kādem* ("servant" of the *jam*) and their assistant, and other members fulfilling the minimum requirement for the *jam*.⁴⁹

The ritual involves several symbolic actions. The initiate's family provides specific items: a nutmeg (*jawz*), symbolizing the initiate's head being offered to God (represented by the *Pir*); a piece of new, unwashed white cloth; an offering (*niāz*); a sacrificial item (*kedmat*, often a rooster); a monetary contribution (*sarāna*); a coin (*hoveyza*) on which to cut the nutmeg; a sharp knife; and a copper tray.⁴⁹ The ceremony proceeds with the *Pir* tying the white cloth around the initiate's (or proxy's) neck, prayers being recited (including a specific "knife prayer"), and the central act: the *Pir* (or their representative) formally breaks the nutmeg placed on the coin, declaring the initiate's commitment.² The pieces of the nutmeg are then distributed among all participants.⁴⁹ Following this, the initiate (or proxy), the *Dalil*'s representative, and the *Kādem* link themselves together by holding each other's garments and proceed around the congregation, performing the hand-kissing ritual with each member while specific prayers are recited.⁴⁹ The ceremony concludes with the removal of the white cloth, which is given to the *Dalil*, while the monetary offering goes to the *Pir*.⁴⁹

The *sar-sepordan* rite is interpreted as a renewal of the original covenant made between God and creation, establishing a sacred bond between the individual, their spiritual guide, and the community.² The relationship established between master (*Pir*) and disciple (*Morid*) is considered a cornerstone of Yarsani social and spiritual life, mirroring the relationship between the primordial *pīr* (Pir Benjamin) and the divine.² While traditionally focused on those born into the faith, some modern branches, like the Elahi group, have reportedly welcomed converts through this initiation process.³²

C. Observances: Fasting (Qaultas, Khavandan), Pilgrimage, and Sacrifices

Beyond the central *jam* and initiation rites, Yarsani religious life involves specific observances, including periods of fasting, pilgrimage, and various forms of offerings or sacrifices.

Fasting: Yarsanis observe specific fasts that differ significantly from Islamic practices like Ramadan (which they are forbidden from observing¹⁶, despite external misconceptions³).

Two major fasts are prominent:

- **The Fast of Khavandan (or Khāwankār/Xawenkar):** This is a three-day fast observed in winter (typically late October to mid-November).³¹ It commemorates a period when Sultan Sahak and his three primary companions (Benjamin, Dawud, Pir Musi) were

besieged in a cave by Sultan Sahak's hostile half-brothers and their tribe.³³ According to the narrative, after three days, divine intervention led to the attackers turning on each other.³³ The fast is followed by the Khavandan festival, a major celebration involving music, communal gatherings, and honoring Khavandagar (God) and Sultan Sahak.³¹ Discussions and explanations of the *kalāms* often take place during this period.⁸

- **The Fast of Qaultas:** This involves three days of fasting in mid-January, culminating in the Qaultas festival on January 18th.²³ This observance commemorates an event where seven followers of Sultan Sahak, journeying to meet him, died from exhaustion but were resurrected by him (through his companion Mustafa Davodan).²³ The festival is celebrated with *tanbur* ceremonies and visits to religious elders in the *Jamkhaneh*.²³ The roots of this ritual are sometimes traced back to Mithraic traditions.²³

Pilgrimage: Yarsani tradition includes the practice of pilgrimage to sacred sites. A significant obligation, particularly for males, is to visit the shrine of Sultan Sahak located in Perdīvar, Iran, at least once in their lifetime.³³ Perdīvar is considered the spiritual focal point or *Gheblah* for Yarsanis, the place where the foundational covenant between Sultan Sahak and his followers was sealed.²⁹ Another major sanctuary and pilgrimage destination is the tomb of Baba Yadgar in Dohab (Dohāb), Iran.²

Sacrifices and Offerings: Offerings and sacrifices play a role in Yarsani practice, often connected with the *jam* ceremony where the offerings are shared communally.²⁹ Different types of offerings serve various purposes:

- **Niyaz (Supplication Offering):** Consists of uncooked edible items like fruit, nuts, sugar lumps, or raw vegetables.³³ It can be offered to make a request (e.g., for health, enlightenment) or to express gratitude (e.g., for a good harvest, healing).³³ This is also part of the *sar-sepordan* requirements.⁴⁹
- **Qorbani (Votive Offering):** Given to fulfill a vow made during a time of distress.³³ This can be "bloodless," such as pomegranate, fish, nutmeg, ceremonial bread, or roasted grains with sugar, or it can be a blood sacrifice involving an unblemished male animal (chicken, ox, or goat under one year old).³³ Bloody sacrifices like bulls, sheep, or roosters must involve healthy male animals.²⁹
- **Khadmat (Service Offering):** A special meal prepared with specific ingredients, typically rooster, rice, and ghee.²⁹ It is often associated with expressing gratitude, particularly linked to Sultan Sahak's prosperity after a conflict.²⁹ The rooster is symbolically significant, perhaps representing the announcement of light over darkness.²⁹ This is also required for initiation.⁴⁹
- **Nazri (Vow Offering):** An edible offering made with the intention of drawing closer to God, without specific item requirements.²⁹
- **Shokraneh (Thankfulness Offering):** A rite performed out of gratitude when reminded of the origin of creation, following the procedure of the *Khadmat* offering.²⁹
- **Abek Jam (Water Distribution):** A specific ritual within the *jam khana* where the *khadem* distributes water from a jug to participants seated in the circle, reminding

followers of Sultan Sahak's actions in Perdīvar, possibly related to resolving disputes.²⁹

VI. Social Structure and Community Organization

A. The Hereditary System: Sayyeds and Laity

The social fabric of the Yarsani community is fundamentally structured around a hereditary division, often described using the term "castes," distinguishing between a priestly class, known as Sayyeds, and the general laity.⁶ Membership in either group is determined by lineage and birthright; one is born a Sayyed or born into the laity.⁶ This hereditary principle forms the basis of the religious leadership and guidance system within the community.

B. Spiritual Guidance: The *Pir*, *Dalil*, and *Morid*

Central to Yarsani religious life is the relationship between a spiritual guide and their followers. Every member of the laity is required to have a designated religious guide, known as a *Pir*.⁶ The *Pir* must belong to one of the Sayyed lineages and is responsible for overseeing the religious life of their followers, known as *Morid* (disciples).⁶ This *Pir-Morid* bond is not chosen but inherited; a Sayyed assumes responsibility for the followers previously guided by their predecessors within the lineage.⁶ This relationship is formally established or renewed through the *sar-sepordan* initiation rite, which links the *Morid* to their specific *Pir*.² This system, reminiscent of Sufi master-disciple relationships, finds its prototype in the bond between the angel Pir Benjamin (the *pīr* of *pīrs*) and the divine.²

Another important hereditary role is that of the *Dalil* ("guide").⁴ The *Dalil* position is held by individuals from specific families (reportedly seven families chosen from among seventy-two original *pīr* by Sultan Sahak).⁹ The *Dalil* plays a specific role in the initiation ceremony.⁴⁹ The divine figure Dawud Koswar (David) is considered the archetypal *Dalil* for all Yarsanis.⁴ Beyond these formal roles, there exists the concept of the *didedār* ("seer" or "enlightened dervish"), individuals who have attained a high level of spiritual insight and can perceive aspects of the inner (*bāten*) world directly.⁶ While the *Pir* and *Dalil* roles are strictly hereditary, the status of *didedār* appears potentially achievable through spiritual endeavor.¹⁹

This structure presents a notable tension. The rigidly hereditary nature of the Sayyed/laity division and the inherited *Pir-Morid* relationship contrasts with theological elements that emphasize the individual soul's long journey towards perfection (*donādon*)⁵ and the theoretical possibility for any man (though perhaps not woman) to achieve high spiritual rank (*didedār*) through personal dedication.⁵ While some texts assert Yarsanism explicitly rejects class and rank⁴, the social reality is clearly hierarchical based on birthright. This suggests a complex interplay where ascribed status (birth into a Sayyed lineage) holds significant practical authority, potentially overshadowing the theological emphasis on achieved spiritual status through individual effort over lifetimes.

C. Lineages of Faith: The *Khandan* System

The Sayyed class itself is further organized into distinct lineages or "families," known as *Khandan*.⁴ These *khandan* are believed to trace their ancestry back to specific figures who played important roles in the history of Yarsanism.⁶ Most Yarsani communities recognize a total of twelve *khandan* ⁶, although one source mentions eleven (seven established during Sultan Sahak's time and four added later).⁴

Each *khandan* functions as a distinct spiritual household, and Yarsani communities or individuals typically maintain affiliation with a particular *khandan* through their hereditary *Pir*.⁶ Prominent *khandan* mentioned in sources include the Shah Ibrahimi ⁹, Atesh Begi ⁴⁰, Shâh Hayâsi ¹⁹, and the lineages associated with the *Dalil* role.⁹ There exists a complex stratification even among these lineages, with some acting as *Pir* to members of another *khandan* while being *Morid* to yet another.¹⁷

This *khandan* system institutionalizes a degree of decentralization within Yarsanism. Since each lineage traces its authority back to different historical figures and may have preserved slightly distinct traditions, interpretations, or emphasis on later divine manifestations ², the *khandan* structure likely serves as a basis for the doctrinal and ritual variations observed across the wider Yarsani community. The parallel efforts by different *khandan* to compile and canonize sacred texts further support this view.³⁶ Thus, the *khandan* system contributes to the religion's internal diversity and inherent pluralism, preventing the formation of a single, monolithic orthodoxy despite shared core beliefs.

VII. Geographical Distribution and Demographics

A. Mapping the Yarsani Presence: Iran and Iraq

The Yarsani (Ahl-e Haqq, Kaka'i) communities are geographically concentrated, primarily inhabiting the border regions between western Iran and eastern/northern Iraq, areas largely corresponding to historical Kurdistan.¹

Iran: Western Iran constitutes the traditional heartland of the faith.¹ Key areas include:

- **Kermanshah Province:** This is a major center, particularly the Gūrānī-speaking regions.² Towns like Sahne ¹³, Sarpol-e Zahab ⁴, and the locations of the main sanctuaries, Perdīvar (Sultan Sahak's tomb) and Dohab (Baba Yadgar's tomb), fall within this area.² Kurdish tribes like Guran, Sanjabi, Kalhor, Zangana, and Jalalvand are prominent here.¹
- **Lorestan Province:** Considered an early center for the development of the doctrine, associated with Shah Khoshin.²
- **Iranian Azerbaijan:** Significant communities exist, including Turkic-speaking Yarsanis.¹ The Maku region (Qaraqoyun district) is specifically mentioned.²¹ In Tabriz, they may be known as Guran, and in Urmia as Abdal Bani.¹¹
- **Kurdistan Province:** Yarsani populations reside here.²²
- **Ilam Province:** Another western province with Yarsani communities.²³
- **Other Areas:** Pockets of Yarsanis are found in Hamedan ¹¹, Zanjan (known as Ser Talbi)

¹⁴, Qazvin (known as Kakavand) ¹¹, Mazandaran on the Caspian coast (known as Khajevand) ¹⁴, near Tehran ², and Klardasht.²²

Iraq: Known primarily as Kaka'i, communities are found in:

- **Iraqi Kurdistan Region (KRI):** Significant presence in Erbil, Sulaimaniyah, and Halabja governorates.¹⁰
- **Kirkuk Governorate:** A major center, especially the Daquq district south-east of Kirkuk city.³
- **Nineveh Governorate:** Communities exist in the Nineveh Plains, particularly near Mosul in areas like al-Hamdaniya district, and the Sārli community near Eski Kalak.¹³
- **Diyala Governorate:** Found primarily in the Khanaqin district along the Iranian border, and in Mandali.²

Other Regions & Diaspora: Sources also mention historical or smaller presences in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India ¹⁰, and connections to Qezlbash groups in Turkey.¹⁴ Due to persecution and instability, significant diaspora communities have formed in Western countries, particularly Sweden and Norway.¹³

The concentration of Yarsani/Kaka'i communities in these often remote, borderland, and ethnically mixed regions, particularly areas disputed between the Iraqi central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (like Kirkuk and Nineveh Plains), has historically rendered them particularly vulnerable.¹ Their geography is intrinsically linked to their experiences of conflict, displacement (e.g., during the Iran-Iraq War, ISIS conflict), and demographic pressures like historical Arabization policies in Iraq.²⁵

B. Population Estimates and Associated Ethnic Groups

Determining the precise number of Yarsanis globally is fraught with difficulty, leading to widely divergent estimates in available sources. As noted earlier, factors contributing to this uncertainty include the community's tradition of secrecy, the lack of official government recognition (particularly in Iran), the potential for individuals to self-identify as Muslim for pragmatic reasons, and the challenges inherent in conducting accurate census counts in historically unstable or marginalized regions.¹

- **Estimates for Iran:** Figures range from over 500,000 ¹ to 1 million or more ¹, with some sources suggesting upwards of 2 million ²⁰ or even 3 million.³¹ If the higher estimates are accurate, Yarsanis would constitute Iran's largest religious minority group not explicitly recognized by the constitution.²²
- **Estimates for Iraq:** Often cited as "unknown" ¹, estimates range from around 110,000-200,000 ³ to approximately 300,000 ²⁰, or 120,000-150,000.³¹
- **Total Estimates:** Global estimates vary dramatically, from 2-3 million ⁴, to around 5 million ³, and sometimes even higher figures like 7 million are mentioned, though potentially less reliably.³²

This significant demographic uncertainty is itself a symptom of the community's precarious political and social standing in their primary regions of residence.

Ethnically, Yarsanism is overwhelmingly associated with the **Kurds**.¹ Specific Kurdish tribes

frequently mentioned include the Guran, Sanjabi, Kalhor, Zangana, and Jalalvand in Iran.¹ The Laki Kurds⁵ and the Shabak community¹ also have substantial Yarsani adherents. Many Yarsanis, especially in the Guran region, self-identify primarily as Guran, a term that carries historical and cultural weight beyond just dialect.²⁴ However, the community also includes non-Kurdish elements, notably **Turkoman** and **Azeri** groups in both Iran and Iraq¹, and some **Arabic**-speaking Kaka'i communities in Iraq.²⁶

VIII. Yarsanism and Islam: A Complex Relationship

The relationship between Yarsanism and Islam is multifaceted, characterized by shared historical roots, significant theological divergences, and a history often marked by misunderstanding, pressure, and persecution stemming from the power dynamics between a dominant majority faith and a vulnerable minority tradition.

A. Theological Dialogue: Convergence and Divergence

A central question, debated both internally and externally, is how to classify Yarsanism relative to Islam.² While some view it as an esoteric or extremist (Ghulat) offshoot of Shia Islam, heavily influenced by Sufism, others assert its status as an independent religion that has merely incorporated certain Islamic elements into its unique framework. Examining key doctrines reveals both points of connection and fundamental differences:

Major Points of Divergence:

- **Concept of Divinity:** Yarsanism's core belief in *mazhariyyat* – the successive manifestation or incarnation (*hulul*) of the Divine Essence in human form (e.g., Ali, Sultan Sahak)¹ – stands in direct contrast to the absolute transcendence and indivisible oneness (Tawhid) of God (Allah) emphasized in mainstream Islam, which strictly rejects divine incarnation.⁷
- **Eschatology (Afterlife):** The Yarsani doctrine of *donādon* or *tanasukh* (reincarnation/transmigration of the soul through 1,001 cycles for purification)¹ is fundamentally incompatible with the Islamic belief in a single earthly life followed by resurrection, a final judgment, and an eternal afterlife in either Paradise (Jannah) or Hell (Jahannam).⁷ Yarsanism generally lacks the concepts of eternal heaven and hell in the Islamic sense.⁷
- **Prophethood and Revelation:** While Islam holds that prophethood concluded with Muhammad and the Quran is the final, complete revelation, Yarsanism's cyclical view of history allows for ongoing divine manifestations and potentially new revelations through figures like Sultan Sahak.¹⁶ The Yarsani sacred texts (*Kalam*) hold divine authority but represent a different mode and history of revelation compared to the Quran.⁷
- **Religious Law (Sharia):** Yarsanis often view the Islamic Sharia as representing only the first, outer (*zāhiri*) stage of religious understanding (the *Shari'at* epoch), which has been superseded by the inner truth (*ḥaqīqa*) revealed in the Fourth Epoch.² This leads to significant differences in practice. Yarsanism has its own four ethical pillars (Paki, Rasti, Nisti, Reda) distinct from the Five Pillars of Islam.⁷ Ritual practices differ substantially,

including fasting (Yarsani fasts vs. Ramadan, which is forbidden for Yarsanis), pilgrimage sites (Perdīvar/Baba Yadgar vs. Mecca), communal worship (*jam* vs. Salat), initiation rites (*sar-sepordan*), and even norms of appearance (e.g., the importance of the mustache for Yarsani men versus the Islamic emphasis on the beard).³ Concepts like Zakat and Khums (Islamic alms) are absent in Yarsanism.⁷

Points of Convergence and Influence:

- **Veneration of Islamic Figures:** Yarsanism incorporates and venerates key figures from Shia Islam, most notably Ali ibn Abi Talib (as a primary divine manifestation)¹, as well as other companions and family members of the Prophet Muhammad like Salman al-Farsi, Qanbar, and Fatimah.¹ Some Ahl al-Haqq texts express belief in the Twelve Imams of Twelver Shiism.¹⁶
- **Sufi Influence:** The imprint of Islamic mysticism (Sufism) is evident in Yarsani terminology (e.g., *Pir*, *Morid*, the stages of *ṭarīqa*, *maʿrefa*, *ḥaqīqa*)², social structures (master-disciple relationship)², and potentially in ritual practices (the *jam* ceremony shares similarities with Sufi *dhikr* gatherings involving music and communal participation).¹²
- **Shared Cosmology Elements:** Yarsani angelology incorporates figures like Gabriel, Michael, Israfil, and Azrael, drawn from the broader Abrahamic and Islamic traditions, albeit reinterpreted as manifestations within the *Haft Tan*.¹
- **Self-Identification:** Some Yarsanis, particularly those associated with modernist trends or certain lineages (like the Sahne tradition), may identify as Shia Muslims or see their faith as the esoteric "core" or "kernel" of Islam, with Sharia being the outer "shell".⁶

Table VIII.A: Comparison of Yarsanism and Islam on Key Doctrines

Doctrinal Area	Mainstream Islamic View	Yarsani View	Key Snippet References
Concept of God	Absolute Oneness (Tawhid); Transcendence; No partners or incarnations.	Divine Essence (Haqq) manifests successively in physical/human form (<i>mazhariyyat</i> , <i>hulul</i>); Ali & Sultan Sahak as key manifestations.	¹
Afterlife	Single life; Resurrection; Final Judgment; Eternal Heaven (Jannah) or Hell (Jahannam).	Reincarnation (<i>donādon</i> , <i>tanasukh</i>); Cycle of 1001 lives for purification; Union with God; No eternal heaven/hell; Final judgment (<i>Pardivari</i>) for unpurified.	¹
Revelation/Prophecy	Quran as final	Ongoing divine	⁷

	revelation; Muhammad as final prophet.	manifestation through epochs; <i>Kalam</i> texts as divine revelations associated with manifestations (e.g., Sultan Sahak).	
Key Figures	Muhammad (final prophet), Prophets of Abrahamic tradition, Companions. (Shia add Imams, esp. Ali).	Sultan Sahak (founder, primary 4th epoch manifestation), Ali (primary 2nd epoch manifestation), Shah Khoshin (3rd epoch), <i>Haft Tan</i> companions (Benjamin, Musi, Dawud, etc.).	¹
Religious Law	Sharia based on Quran and Sunnah (Hadith); Five Pillars central (Shahada, Salat, Zakat, Sawm, Hajj).	Sharia seen as outer layer/first epoch, superseded by <i>Haqiqat</i> ; Four Pillars (Paki, Rasti, Nisti, Reda); Distinct rituals, fasting, pilgrimage; Different social norms.	²
Central Ritual	Daily prayers (Salat), Friday congregational prayer, Ramadan fast, Hajj pilgrimage.	<i>Jam</i> ceremony (communal gathering with music, chanting <i>kalām</i> , shared food/water, supervised by Sayyed).	⁶

B. Historical Interactions and External Perceptions

The historical relationship between Yarsanis and their Muslim neighbors has often been characterized by misunderstanding and hostility from the dominant group. Muslims, both Sunni and Shia, have frequently perceived the Ahl-e Haqq through the lens of Islamic orthodoxy, labeling them as heterodox Muslims, extremist Shi'ites (Ghulat), or, most commonly, "Ali-Ilahis" due to their veneration of Ali.¹ This labeling, often rejected by Yarsanis themselves¹, tends to oversimplify their complex beliefs and frame them as deviant Muslims rather than adherents of a distinct tradition. More hostile labels like "devil-worshippers"⁵ also appear in external discourse.

This perception as religiously deviant has historically translated into pressure and persecution. Yarsanis have faced harassment from Islamic governments and societies over centuries.⁴ In contemporary Iran, the Islamic Republic does not officially recognize Yarsanism as a legitimate

religious minority.²² They are sometimes referred to by officials as a "misguided cult" ²² or simply treated as Shia Muslims practicing Sufism.²² This lack of recognition underpins systemic discrimination: Yarsani beliefs can be deemed blasphemous under Iranian law ²²; adherents face arbitrary arrest, detention, and harassment, often under broad national security charges like "propaganda against the state" or "enmity against God" ²², as exemplified by the 2024 execution of Reza Rasaei.⁵⁴ Socially, they experience ostracization in schools and communities, face employment discrimination (particularly men identifiable by their traditional mustaches), and are sometimes targeted by incitement from Shia clerics.²² Many feel compelled to hide their religious identity due to the pressure of the Islamic system ¹, and numerous Yarsanis have emigrated seeking greater religious freedom.²² For Kurdish Yarsanis, this religious discrimination intersects with ethnic discrimination.³⁰ In Iraq, the Kaka'i face similar challenges. Although recognized by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), they lack federal recognition ⁵⁹ and face discrimination based on their poorly understood faith.²⁶ They have been targets of threats, kidnappings, assassinations, and economic boycotts.²⁶ Extremist groups like Al-Qaeda and particularly ISIS have severely persecuted them, viewing them as heretics.²⁶ ISIS issued death threats, destroyed Kaka'i shrines and villages, and caused mass displacement from areas like the Nineveh Plains and Kirkuk.¹³ Returning to their homes remains difficult due to ongoing insecurity, the presence of militias, destruction, and lack of reconstruction support.²⁸ There have also been instances of Kaka'i places of worship being seized and converted into mosques or Hussainiyas.⁵² This pattern of interaction is fundamentally shaped by the power imbalance between the dominant Islamic majority and the Yarsani/Kaka'i minority. External perceptions, discrimination, and persecution are direct consequences of this dynamic, forcing the community into strategies of secrecy or adaptation.¹ The syncretic nature of Yarsanism, while reflecting its rich history, paradoxically makes it vulnerable; outsiders often seize upon familiar Islamic elements (like Ali) to misinterpret and condemn the faith as heresy within an Islamic framework, rather than engaging with its distinct theological system.¹

C. Internal Dynamics: Traditionalist and Modernist Views

The Yarsani community is not monolithic, and internal diversity exists regarding the interpretation of beliefs and the relationship with Islam. A significant division exists between "traditionalists" and "modernists".⁶

- **Traditionalists:** Constituting the majority, often residing in rural areas, traditionalists tend to emphasize the distinctness of Yarsanism from Islam and remain closely tied to the ancient tenets and rituals.⁵ They may view attempts to reconcile Yarsanism with Islam with suspicion, potentially seeing modernist interpretations as heretical or a betrayal ("giving into the ways of the world").³³ Within Iranian traditionalism, further nuances exist, such as the highly conservative Guran group that strongly rejects any links with Islam, contrasting with the tradition centered in Sahne, which historically accepted connections with Shia Islam.⁶

- **Modernists:** This stream follows the reinterpretations proposed by Hājī Ne'matollāh Mokri Jeyhunābādi and his influential successors, Nur 'Alī Elāhi and Dr. Behram Elahi.⁶ This perspective often seeks to articulate Yarsani beliefs in a way that is more accessible or compatible with the surrounding Islamic culture, sometimes emphasizing universal mystical principles or seeking closer alignment with Shi'ism, possibly as a strategy for protection or broader acceptance.¹⁰ The Elahi branch, for instance, has been noted for its openness to accepting converts through the *sar sepordan* rite.³²

This internal divergence reflects differing strategies for navigating the challenges of being a minority faith and potentially different theological emphases passed down through various *khandan* lineages.

IX. Contemporary Status, Cultural Expressions, and Challenges

A. Living Culture: Music, Festivals, and Identity Expression

Despite facing significant adversity, Yarsani culture remains vibrant, with unique forms of expression playing a crucial role in maintaining identity and community cohesion. Music holds a particularly central place. The sacred *tanbur* (long-necked lute) and sometimes the *daf* (frame drum) are integral to religious rituals and cultural life.¹ Complex musical forms known as *maqam* structure ritual performances.¹⁰ Both men and women participate in musical traditions.³¹

Communal festivals are key occasions for cultural expression. Major celebrations include:

- **Khavandan (Xawandkar/Xawenkar):** An annual festival following a three-day fast, typically held in late October or mid-November.³¹ It commemorates the deliverance of Sultan Sahak and his companions and serves as a vital time for Yarsanis to gather, honor their heritage, and express their identity through traditional music (featuring *tanbur* and *daf*), hymns telling stories of their faith, rituals, and often vibrant traditional clothing.³¹
- **Qaultas:** Celebrated on January 18th after a three-day fast.²³ It commemorates the resurrection of seven followers by Sultan Sahak and involves *tanbur* ceremonies and visits to religious elders in the *Jamkhaneh*.²³

These festivals, along with the regular *jam* gatherings, are powerful affirmations of Yarsani identity and resilience.³¹ In the contemporary era, technology, particularly online platforms like Facebook, has provided new avenues for Yarsanis, especially the younger generation, to connect across geographical distances, share information, express their identity more openly than was previously possible due to secrecy constraints, and build ethnic solidarity.³⁴ The distinctive handlebar moustache worn by many Yarsani men also serves as a visible cultural and religious marker, though it can also make them targets for discrimination.⁴ The rich metaphorical discourse found in Yarsani texts serves not only to convey complex theological ideas but also functions as a form of "anti-language," allowing the expression of potentially heterodox concepts in a coded manner, navigating the constraints imposed by dominant

orthodoxies.⁴⁵ In the face of persecution, these cultural expressions—music, festivals, online community building, symbolic language, and visual markers—function as vital acts of resistance and continuity, preserving identity against forces seeking assimilation or erasure.²³

B. Challenges and Human Rights Concerns in Iran

The contemporary situation for Yarsanis in Iran is marked by significant challenges stemming from their lack of official recognition and the nature of the Islamic Republic's governance. Despite being a large minority, potentially numbering over a million, Yarsanism is not acknowledged as a protected religious minority under the Iranian constitution, unlike Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians.²² This leaves them legally vulnerable and subject to systemic discrimination and persecution.⁵³

Key human rights concerns include:

- **Legal Status:** The government often considers Yarsanis as deviant Shia Muslims practicing Sufism or labels them a "misguided cult".²² Their core beliefs, particularly regarding divine manifestation and reincarnation, are deemed blasphemous under prevailing interpretations of Islamic law, carrying severe potential penalties, including death.²² Amendments to the penal code criminalizing insults to "divine religions or Islamic schools of thought" and "deviant educational or proselytizing activity" further increase their vulnerability.⁵⁶
- **Arbitrary Detention and Prosecution:** Yarsanis have reportedly faced arbitrary arrest, detention, and harassment, often based on vague national security charges such as "propaganda against the state" or the severe charge of *moharebeh* ("enmity against God").²² Trials often fall short of international standards of fairness.⁵⁴ The execution of Reza Rasaei, a Yarsani protester, in August 2024 underscores the lethal potential of such charges.⁵⁴
- **Social and Economic Discrimination:** Yarsanis report widespread societal discrimination. Children may be ostracized in schools and community facilities.⁵⁶ Men, identifiable by their traditional mustaches, face significant employment discrimination.⁵⁶ Shia clerics have reportedly encouraged social discrimination against the group.⁵⁶
- **Restrictions on Religious Practice:** The lack of official recognition means Yarsanis are often prevented from practicing their faith openly.²³ They may be forced to assemble in private homes for rituals like the *jam*.⁵⁶
- **Forced Assimilation and Emigration:** The cumulative effect of legal vulnerability, persecution, and discrimination creates an environment of social exclusion and pressure, driving many Yarsanis to emigrate in search of greater freedom and security.²²
- **Intersectionality:** For the majority of Yarsanis who are also ethnically Kurdish, religious discrimination intersects with ethnic discrimination, subjecting them to compounded marginalization and repression within Iran, where Kurdish political and cultural expression is often suppressed.³⁰

These issues exist within a broader context of severe human rights restrictions in Iran, targeting various ethnic and religious minorities (including Baha'is, Christian converts, Sunni

Muslims, Gonabadi Dervishes), political dissidents, women, human rights defenders, journalists, and LGBTI individuals, characterized by widespread use of arbitrary detention, torture, unfair trials, and the death penalty.⁵³

C. Challenges and Human Rights Concerns in Iraq (Kaka'i)

In Iraq, the Kaka'i community faces a distinct but equally challenging set of human rights concerns, exacerbated by political instability, sectarian violence, and the legacy of conflict.

- **Legal Status and Recognition:** While the KRG officially recognizes the Kaka'i religion, they lack recognition under federal Iraqi law and the constitution.⁵⁹ This means they cannot register their religion on national identity documents and are often recorded as Muslims, although some may prefer this designation for pragmatic reasons of protection.²⁶ This lack of federal status contributes to discrimination and limits access to certain rights and protections.⁵⁹
- **Security Threats and Violence:** Kaka'is have been severely targeted by extremist groups, particularly Al-Qaeda after 2003 and ISIS from 2014 onwards.²⁵ Their distinct religious identity made them targets for threats, intimidation, assassinations, kidnappings, bombings of villages and shrines, and demands for forced conversion.¹³ ISIS attacks led to mass displacement, particularly from the Nineveh Plains and areas around Kirkuk.²⁵ Even after the territorial defeat of ISIS, Kaka'i areas, often located in disputed territories with complex security arrangements involving Iraqi Security Forces, Kurdish Peshmerga, and various Popular Mobilization Units (PMF), remain vulnerable to ongoing attacks by ISIS remnants and potentially other armed groups.²⁵
- **Displacement and Return:** Large numbers of Kaka'is were displaced by conflict.²⁵ Returning to their areas of origin has been slow and fraught with obstacles, including pervasive insecurity, the presence of mines and unexploded ordnance, widespread destruction of homes and infrastructure, lack of basic services and reconstruction assistance, and sometimes obstruction by political and military authorities controlling retaken areas.²⁸ Competing land claims and demographic changes resulting from displacement and historical policies like Arabization further complicate returns.²⁵
- **Discrimination and Harassment:** Kaka'is report facing discrimination from government officials (e.g., difficulties accessing public services) and societal actors.²⁶ They experience verbal harassment, social alienation, boycotts of businesses, and insults to their beliefs.²⁶ The seizure of Kaka'i places of worship for conversion into mosques or Hussainiyas represents a severe form of religious intolerance.⁵²
- **Lack of Political Protection:** The lack of federal recognition translates into limited political protection and representation.³ Unlike some other minorities like Christians and Turkmen, Kaka'is (along with Yazidis, Shabak, etc.) do not have reserved quota seats in the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament, potentially limiting their political voice.⁶⁰
- **Existential Threat:** The cumulative impact of violence, displacement, discrimination, and lack of protection has led to fears among the Kaka'i community about the very survival of their religious identity and cultural heritage in Iraq.⁵²

These challenges occur within a broader Iraqi context where human rights abuses, including torture, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, and lack of accountability for security forces and militias, remain significant concerns, disproportionately affecting vulnerable minority groups.⁶⁰

D. International Scrutiny: Reports on Religious Freedom and Minority Rights

The precarious situation of Yarsanis/Kaka'is in both Iran and Iraq has drawn attention from international human rights organizations and monitoring bodies. Reports from organizations such as Amnesty International⁶⁶, Human Rights Watch⁵⁴, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran⁵⁶, the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI)⁵⁵, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)⁶⁴, Minority Rights Group International²⁶, and government bodies like the US State Department²⁸ consistently document the patterns of persecution, discrimination, violence, lack of legal recognition, and restrictions on freedom of religion or belief faced by these communities.

These reports highlight the systemic nature of the discrimination in Iran, linking it to the lack of constitutional protection and the enforcement of discriminatory laws.⁵³ They document specific cases of arbitrary detention, unfair trials, and executions.⁵⁴ In Iraq, reports emphasize the devastating impact of ISIS violence, the ongoing security vacuum in minority areas, the challenges of displacement and return, and the persistence of societal and institutional discrimination.²⁵ UN bodies have investigated ISIS crimes against minorities, including Kaka'is⁵⁵, and have urged Iraqi authorities to address issues like enforced disappearances and accountability.⁶⁰ International reports frequently call for policy reforms, independent investigations into abuses, accountability for perpetrators, and greater protection for the rights of religious minorities in both countries.⁵³ The inclusion of Yarsanis/Kaka'is in these reports underscores their status as vulnerable groups requiring international attention and advocacy.

X. Conclusion

A. Summary of Yarsanism's Distinctive Identity

Yarsanism, also known as Ahl-e Haqq or Kaka'i, emerges from this analysis as a distinct and resilient religious tradition with a rich, syncretic history primarily rooted in the Kurdish regions of western Iran and Iraq. Founded formally by Sultan Sahak in the late 14th/early 15th century, its identity is shaped by a unique theological framework fundamentally differing from mainstream Islam, despite incorporating certain Islamic figures and Sufi influences. Key distinguishing features include the core belief in successive divine manifestations (*mazhariyyat*) culminating in Sultan Sahak, the doctrine of the soul's cyclical journey through reincarnation (*donādon*) towards purification and union with the Divine (Haq), and the cosmological understanding of interconnected inner (*bātinī*) and outer (*zāhirī*) worlds. The faith's sacred texts, primarily the *Kalam* collections transmitted largely in the Gorani

language, articulate this worldview and guide practice. Central rituals like the communal *jam* ceremony, characterized by its circular gathering, sacred *tanbur* music, and chanting, serve as vital expressions of collective identity and spiritual connection. The *sar-sepordan* initiation rite formally binds adherents to their hereditary spiritual guides (*Pir*) within a social structure organized around Sayyed lineages (*khandan*). This hereditary structure coexists, sometimes uneasily, with theological emphases on individual spiritual progress. The four ethical pillars—Purity (*Paki*), Truth (*Rasti*), Nothingness (*Nisti*), and Magnanimity (*Reda*)—provide a distinct moral compass.

B. Reflection on Contemporary Resilience and Vulnerability

Despite its deep historical roots and unique cultural expressions, the Yarsani/Kaka'i community faces profound contemporary challenges that threaten its continuity. In both Iran and Iraq, they endure significant vulnerability stemming from a lack of full legal recognition, systemic discrimination, societal prejudice, and targeted violence.

In Iran, the absence of constitutional protection leaves Yarsanis exposed to arbitrary arrest, prosecution under blasphemy or national security laws, execution, and pervasive social and economic discrimination, forcing many into secrecy or emigration.²² In Iraq, the Kaka'i have suffered disproportionately from sectarian violence and the genocidal campaigns of extremist groups like ISIS, leading to mass displacement, destruction of heritage sites, and ongoing insecurity in their traditional homelands, particularly in disputed territories.²⁵ The lack of effective state protection and accountability in both countries exacerbates these vulnerabilities.

Yet, amidst these severe pressures, the Yarsani/Kaka'i people demonstrate remarkable resilience. The continued practice of their rituals, the celebration of festivals like Khavandan and Qaultas, the centrality of music (*tanbur*), and the recent utilization of modern media for identity expression all serve as powerful affirmations of their distinct cultural and religious heritage.²³ These cultural practices are not merely traditions but acts of resistance against assimilation and erasure. The future of Yarsanism hinges on the ability of its adherents to safely practice their faith, preserve their culture, and secure fundamental human rights and protections within the complex political landscapes of Iran and Iraq. International awareness and advocacy, as highlighted by numerous human rights reports, remain crucial in supporting their struggle for recognition, security, and dignity.

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