

## Why Yarsanis as an Unrecognized Religious Community Face Discrimination and Suppression in Iran?

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### Abstract

The Yarsani community in Iran has been subjected to suppression due to contradictions between their beliefs and the mainstream Shia-Twelve theology. Yarsanism is a syncretic religious movement that incorporates elements of pre-Islamic beliefs, Sufism, and Shia Islam, and it differs significantly from mainstream Shia-Twelve theology. This has led to discrimination against the Yarsani community, with their practices and beliefs often considered heretical. However, Yarsanis have expressed a willingness to live peacefully in Iran despite these differences. This paper aims to explore the historical context of Yarsanism and the contradictions with Shia-Twelve theology, as well as the impact of this on the Yarsani community in Iran.

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## Introduction

Yarsanism is a syncretic religion that emerged in Iran in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, blending elements of pre-Islamic Kurdish and Persian beliefs with Islamic Sufi mysticism. The followers of Yarsanism are known as Yarsanis or Ahl-e Haqq, meaning “people of truth” in Persian (Hosseini, 2022, pp. 1-12).

The history of Yarsanism in Iran is complex and intertwined with the country’s social and political history. The religion emerged in the 14th century in the western Iranian region of Kurdistan and spread to other parts of the country over time. The religion was initially persecuted by the ruling authorities due to its perceived deviation from orthodox Islam. Yarsanis faced discrimination and repression throughout Iranian history, with many Yarsani leaders and followers being imprisoned, tortured, or killed (Hosseini, 2022, pp. 1-12).

In modern times, the Yarsani community has faced some degree of acceptance and recognition in Iran. The religion is officially recognized as a minority religion in Iran, and Yarsanis have been granted some rights, such as the right to hold religious gatherings and perform religious rituals. However, Yarsanis continue to face social and political discrimination, and their religious practices and beliefs are often misunderstood or stigmatized by the wider Iranian society (Hosseini, 2022, pp. 1-12).

Yarsanism remains an important cultural and religious tradition in Iran, with a significant number of followers in the Kurdish regions of western Iran, as well as other parts of the country. The religion has also spread to other countries, such as Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, where it is known by different names and has different regional variations (Hosseini, 2022, pp. 1-12).

The prime objective of this study is to analyze the socio-cultural and economic life of Yarsanis in a way when Iranian constitution does not recognize them as a religious minority. So, they have no constitutional or political privileges. Moreover, study also investigates their beliefs and faith along with their acceptance in Iranian state and society (Hosseini, 2022, pp. 1-12).

Hence, firstly the study investigates their argument for facing discriminations and restrictions in Iran.

### **Blame of Facing Discrimination and Restrictions from the Iranian Authorities**

As Iranian constitution does not recognize Yarsanis as recognized religious minority, Yarsanis continue to face various forms of discrimination and restrictions in the country. Some examples include;

- **Social Discrimination**

Yarsanis are often stigmatized and discriminated against by the wider Iranian society, which can make it difficult for them to access education, employment, and other basic services (Montaruli, 2021).

- **Religious Discrimination**

Yarsanis are often discriminated against by the Iranian government, which tends to favor Shia Islam over other religious groups. Yarsanis have faced restrictions on their religious practices, such as being denied permits to build new places of worship or being prevented from publicly practicing their religion (Montaruli, 2021).

- **Political Discrimination**

Yarsanis are often excluded from political representation and decision-making processes in Iran, which can make it difficult for them to have their voices heard and to advocate for their rights (Montaruli, 2021).

- **Violence and Persecution**

Yarsanis have faced violent attacks and persecution throughout Iranian history. In recent years, there have been reports of Yarsanis being harassed, arrested, and even killed by Iranian security forces (Montaruli, 2021).

In addition, Yarsanis in Iran continue to face significant challenges in terms of discrimination and restrictions on their religious, social, and political rights. While the Iranian government has taken some steps to recognize and protect Yarsani rights (as claimed by some officials), more needs to be done to ensure that Yarsanis are able to live and practice their religion freely and without fear of persecution (Montaruli, 2021).

## Iranian Official Stance against the Blame for Yarsanis' Suppression

Although Iranian constitution does not recognize Yarsanis as religious minority, some officials still claim to deliver some political privileges to Yarsanis. However, they are unable to show any document in this regard. Moreover, they also claim that Yarsanis have now been allowed to hold religious gatherings and perform their rituals, and they are legally entitled to equal protection under the law. However, despite these claims regarding protections, Yarsanis still face discrimination and restrictions in various forms, as mentioned earlier (Asim, 2023).

The Iranian government has denied allegations of discrimination against Yarsanis, arguing that it treats all religious minorities equally and that any discrimination that occurs is due to individual or societal attitudes, rather than official policy. However, human rights groups and Yarsani leaders have criticized the government for not doing enough to protect Yarsanis and for allowing discrimination and violence against them to continue (Asim, 2023).

As the study finds contradictions between Shia-Twelve theology and Yarsanism that have become a reason of triggering Iranian state and society to react against Yarsani community in Iran, there is a comprehensive comparative analysis of differences between Yarsanism and Twelver-Shia Islam.

## Differences between Yarsanism and Twelver-Shia Islam

There are several major differences between Yarsanism and Twelver Shia Islam:

### 1) Beliefs about God

Yarsanis believe in a single God who is present in all things, while Twelver Shia Muslims believe in a single, all-powerful God who is distinct from His creation (Hosseini B. , 2020, pp. 20-22).

### 2) Beliefs about Prophets

Yarsanis do not follow the traditional Islamic prophetic lineage of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, but rather have their own prophetic lineage that includes figures such as Ali, Salman, and Pir (Hosseini B. , 2020, pp. 20-22).

### 3) Religious Practices

Yarsanis practice a distinct set of religious rituals, including the recitation of poetry, dancing, and singing, which are not part of traditional Shia Islamic practices (Hosseini B. , 2020, pp. 20-22).

### 4) Pilgrimage

While Shia Muslims make pilgrimages to the cities of Mecca and Medina, Yarsanis have their own sacred sites, such as the tomb of Sultan Sahak in Iran and the tomb of Sheikh Adi in Iraq (Hosseini B. , 2020, pp. 20-22).

### 5) Interpretation of Religious Texts

Yarsanis do not recognize the traditional Islamic texts such as the Quran and Hadith as the sole sources of religious authority. Instead, they have their own set of sacred texts, such as the Kalam-e Saranjam and the Kalam-e Piryai, which are considered to be of equal importance (Hosseini B. , 2020, pp. 20-22).

Although both Yarsanism and Twelver Shia Islam share some common beliefs and practices, they also have significant differences in their beliefs, practices, and interpretations of religious texts (Hosseini B. , 2020, pp. 20-22).

## **Yarsanis Lifestyle within Iran**

Yarsani people in Iran, like other minority communities, have diverse lifestyles, and it is not possible to describe a uniform lifestyle for all Yarsanis. However, there are some commonalities in the lifestyle of many Yarsani people (BBC, 2019).

Yarsanis are generally rural people who live in the Zagros Mountains in western Iran. They are primarily involved in agriculture, animal husbandry, and handicrafts. Many Yarsanis live in small villages and have close-knit communities. Their traditional way of life is based on a strong sense of community, respect for nature, and reverence for their spiritual leaders (BBC, 2019).

Due to distinct culture and language, they have their own unique music, poetry, and dance. They also have their own religious rituals, which include the recitation of poetry, singing, and dancing. Many Yarsani festivals and ceremonies are held in the open air, in natural settings, such as mountains and forests, which are considered to be sacred spaces (BBC, 2019).

In recent years, some Yarsani people have migrated to urban areas in search of better economic opportunities. However, they still maintain strong ties to their traditional way of life and continue to practice their unique culture and religious traditions (BBC, 2019).

## **Socio-Cultural Economic Associations of Iranian Yarsanis with Iraqi and Turkish Yarsanis**

Yarsani people in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey share a common religious and cultural heritage, but their economic and social interactions with each other have been limited due to political, social, and economic factors.

### **1) Cultural Bonds**

Yarsani people share a common religious and cultural heritage, and they have their own unique music, poetry, and dance. They also have their own religious rituals, which include the recitation of poetry, singing, and dancing. Many Yarsani festivals and ceremonies are held in the open air, in natural settings, such as mountains and forests, which are considered to be sacred spaces. These cultural bonds have contributed to the formation of a shared identity among Yarsani people, despite their geographical and political divisions (Ghafouri, 2020).

### **2) Economic Bonds**

There have been limited economic bonds between Yarsani people in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey due to political and economic factors. The three countries have different economic systems and policies, which have limited economic cooperation and trade. However, there have been some efforts to promote economic cooperation among the three countries in recent years, particularly in the areas of energy, trade, and tourism (Ghafouri, 2020).

One example of economic cooperation among Yarsani people in the region is the promotion of Yarsani cultural tourism. Yarsani cultural tourism has the potential to attract visitors from all three countries, as well as from other parts of the world. This could lead to the development of tourism infrastructure, such as hotels, restaurants, and transportation, which would benefit local economies (Ghafouri, 2020).

Another area of potential economic cooperation is the sharing of agricultural and natural resources. The Zagros Mountains, where many Yarsani people live, are rich in natural resources, such as water, minerals, and fertile soil. Sharing these resources could benefit all three countries and improve the economic opportunities for Yarsani people in the region (Ghafouri, 2020).

In conclusion, while Yarsani people in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey share a common cultural and religious heritage, their economic interactions have been limited due to political and economic factors. However, there are potential areas for economic cooperation and development, particularly in the areas of tourism and natural resource sharing (Ghafouri, 2020).

### **Terrorist Attacks against Yarsanis in Iran**

There have been sporadic reports of violence and discrimination against Yarsani people in Iran, including cases of physical attacks, property damage, and other forms of intimidation. Some of these incidents have been linked to extremist groups and individuals who hold intolerant views towards religious minorities, including Yarsanis (Asim M. , 2023).

For example, in September 2018, a group of Yarsani worshipers were attacked in a mosque in the city of Kermanshah by a group of Sunni extremists. The attackers reportedly beat the worshipers and vandalized the mosque, causing widespread outrage and condemnation (Asim M. , 2023).

There have also been reports of discrimination against Yarsani people in employment, education, and other areas of public life, as well as restrictions on their religious practices and beliefs (Asim M. , 2023).

It's worth noting, however, that acts of violence against Yarsanis in Iran are not common or widespread, and many Yarsanis live peacefully alongside members of other religious communities. On the other hand, Iranian government has also taken steps to protect the rights of religious minorities, including Yarsanis, and has condemned acts of violence and discrimination against them (Asim M. , 2023).

### **Significant Worship Places of Yarsanis in Iran**

There are several famous worship places and holy sites for Yarsanis in Iran, including:

**1) Lalish**

This is the most important Yarsani pilgrimage site in Iran, located in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The shrine is dedicated to Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, a 12<sup>th</sup>-century Yarsani spiritual leader (ECOI, 2017).

**2) Qara Kelisa**

This is a Yarsani shrine located in the Chaldoran region of Iran, near the border with Turkey. The shrine is dedicated to Saint Thaddeus, one of the 12 apostles of Jesus (ECOI, 2017).

**3) Pire Zan**

This is a Yarsani shrine located in the Kermanshah region of Iran, where many Yarsanis live. The shrine is dedicated to a female Yarsani saint who is believed to have supernatural powers (ECOI, 2017).

**4) Sheikh Abad**

This is a Yarsani shrine located in the Lorestan region of Iran, near the city of Khorramabad. The shrine is dedicated to Sheikh Abad, a 14th-century Yarsani spiritual leader (ECOI, 2017).

These are just a few examples of the many Yarsani holy sites and shrines that are scattered throughout Iran. These sites are considered to be sacred by Yarsani believers and are often visited by pilgrims seeking spiritual guidance and blessings.

## **Yarsanis Lifestyle specifically in Qara Kelisa, Pire Zan and Sheikh Abad**

It is significant to note that the lifestyles of Yarsani people may vary depending on their geographic location and cultural practices. Unlike some general traits of Yarsanis across the Iran, this study provides some general information on the lifestyles of Yarsanis in Qara Kelisa, Pire Zan, and Sheikh Abad based on available resources.

### **1) Yarsanis Lifestyle in Qara Kelisa**

Qara Kelisa is a Yarsani shrine located in the Chaldoran region of Iran. The shrine attracts many Yarsani pilgrims and visitors throughout the year. The Yarsani community in this region is predominantly involved in agriculture and livestock farming. They cultivate crops such as wheat, barley, and vegetables, and raise livestock like sheep, goats, and cattle. Many Yarsanis in this region also work as shepherds, tending to their flocks on the surrounding hills and mountains. The Yarsanis in this region have a rich cultural heritage and are known for their traditional music, dances, and poetry (ECOI, 2017).

### **2) Yarsanis Lifestyle in Pire Zan**

Pire Zan is a Yarsani shrine located in the Kermanshah region of Iran, where many Yarsanis live. The Yarsani community in this region is involved in a variety of occupations, including agriculture, animal husbandry, and handicrafts. They cultivate crops such as wheat, barley, and fruits, and raise livestock like sheep and goats. Some Yarsanis in this region are also known for their skill in carpet weaving and other handicrafts. The Yarsani community in this region has a rich cultural heritage and is known for its traditional music, dances, and poetry (ECOI, 2017).

### **3) Yarsanis Lifestyle in Sheikh Abad**

Sheikh Abad is a Yarsani shrine located in the Lorestan region of Iran. The Yarsani community in this region is involved in a variety of occupations, including agriculture, animal husbandry, and handicrafts. They cultivate crops such as wheat, barley, and rice, and raise livestock like sheep, goats, and cattle. Some Yarsanis in this region are also known for their skill in weaving and other handicrafts. The Yarsani community in this region has a rich cultural heritage and is known for its traditional music, dances, and poetry (ECOI, 2017).

In summary, the lifestyles of Yarsani people in Qara Kelisa, Pire Zan, and Sheikh Abad are characterized by a strong connection to the land and their cultural traditions. They engage in various occupations, including agriculture, animal husbandry, and handicrafts, and are known for their rich cultural heritage and traditional arts (ECOI, 2017).

## **Critical Study of Yarsanis' Holy Book "Kalam-e-Saranjam"**

The holy book of the Yarsani religion, known as the Kalam-e Saranjam, is a collection of poetry, hymns, and sayings attributed to various Yarsani spiritual leaders, including Sultan Sahak and Sultan Irak. The book is written in a variety of languages, including Kurdish, Persian, Arabic, and Avestan, and is considered a sacred text by Yarsani followers (Hamzehee, 2021, pp. 184-195).

From a critical perspective, the Kalam-e Saranjam can be seen as a reflection of the Yarsani worldview and spiritual practices. It emphasizes the importance of personal spiritual experience and connection to the divine, rather than adherence to rigid religious doctrine. This is reflected in the book's mystical poetry, which often employs symbolism and allegory to describe the relationship between the individual soul and the divine (Hamzehee, 2021, pp. 184-195).

One of the key themes of the Kalam-e Saranjam is the idea of divine unity, which is expressed through the concept of the Heft Tan, or Seven Bodies. This concept sees all of creation as part of a single spiritual body, with different manifestations corresponding to different levels of existence. The book also includes references to other religious traditions, including Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity, which reflects the syncretic nature of Yarsani beliefs (Hamzehee, 2021, pp. 184-195).

However, it is worth noting that the Kalam-e Saranjam has been subject to various interpretations and has been used to justify different religious practices over the centuries. This has led to some controversy and debate within the Yarsani community, particularly around issues related to gender and sexuality (Hamzehee, 2021, pp. 184-195).

In general, the Kalam-e Saranjam is a central text in the Yarsani religion, reflecting its syncretic and mystical worldview. While it has been subject to various interpretations and debates, it remains a source of spiritual inspiration and guidance for many Yarsani followers (Hamzehee, 2021, pp. 184-195).

### **Relationship of Yarsanism with Islam, Zoroastrianism and Christianity**

The reasons for why Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity do not necessarily regard or respect Yarsanism may be complex and varied. One possible explanation is that Yarsanism, like other syncretic religions, does not fit neatly within established religious categories and may be seen as a challenge to orthodox beliefs and practices. This can lead to suspicion or hostility from other religious communities (Hamzehee, 2021, pp. 184-195).

Additionally, Yarsanism has historically been associated with certain cultural and ethnic groups, such as the Kurdish people, who have faced discrimination and marginalization in many parts of the Middle East. This may contribute to negative attitudes towards Yarsanism and its followers (Hamzehee, 2021, pp. 184-195).

It is also worth noting that religious intolerance and persecution are unfortunately common throughout history and across different religious traditions. While Yarsanism may be subject to discrimination or disrespect from certain groups, it is important to recognize that this is not unique to Yarsanism and is a broader issue related to religious diversity and tolerance (Hamzehee, 2021, pp. 184-195).

### **Iranian Twelver-Shia Theologists that Oppose Yarsanism**

It is difficult to provide an exhaustive list of Iranian scholars who oppose Yarsani religion, as views on this topic can vary widely among scholars. However, some prominent Iranian scholars who have criticized Yarsanism include:

- 1) **Ayatollah Ali Khamenei**; the current Supreme Leader of Iran has expressed criticism of Yarsani beliefs, stating that they are inconsistent with Islamic teachings (Asghar, 2023).
- 2) **Ayatollah Fazel Lankarani**; a highly respected Shia scholar who served as a member of the Assembly of Experts, has been critical of Yarsanism and has argued that it represents a deviation from mainstream Islam (Asghar, 2023).
- 3) **Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati**; a prominent conservative cleric who serves as the secretary of the Guardian Council, has expressed criticism of Yarsani beliefs and practices (Asghar, 2023).

- 4) **Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi**; a former head of the Judiciary who is known for his conservative views, has been critical of Yarsanism and has argued that it represents a form of heresy (Asghar, 2023).

It should be noted, however, that not all Iranian scholars hold negative views of Yarsanism, and some may view it as a legitimate religious tradition with its own unique history and practices.

## Conclusion

It has been verified that Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, as the Supreme Leader of Iran and the highest religious authority in the country, has expressed criticism of Yarsani beliefs and practices. However, it is important to note that Iran's legal system recognizes Yarsanism as a legitimate religion and guarantees its adherents the right to practice their faith freely (Asim D. M., 2023).

In practice, there may be some discrimination or persecution against Yarsani communities in Iran, particularly in areas where they are a minority. Although the Iranian government has also taken steps to protect the rights of some religious minorities but it does not recognize Yarsanism. Later on, international pressure against the state-backed suppression of Yarsanis has forced Iranian authorities to announce some rights for them. However, still it is unclear that which rights Iranian government has delivered to Yarsanis (Asim M. , 2023).

In addition, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and other branches of the Iranian government are responsible for enforcing Iran's laws and regulations, including those that protect the rights of religious minorities. While there may be some individuals within these organizations who hold negative views of Yarsanism, this is their duty to enforce the law and protect the rights of all Iranians, regardless of their religious beliefs.

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