

# History of Western Academic Research on Yârsân 1836-2020

Tarîxa Xebatên Akademîk ên li Rojava ku li ser  
Yarsanan Hatine Kirin 1836-2020

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## ABSTRACT:

The Yârsân (Yâresân or Yâristân) or Ahl-i Haqq or Ahl-e Haqq (Believers of the Truth) are a religious minority in Iran whose traditions and beliefs have received some attention from academics over the last century.

This article gives a brief overview of the history of Yârsân studies and its developing from the beginning till 2020 and researchers' efforts to understand their beliefs along with a brief critique of their attempts.

**Keywords:** Yârsân, Ahl-i Haqq, Kurdish religions, Kurdish beliefs, academic researches.

## PUXTE:

Yârsân (Yâresân an Yâristân) an Ehl-i Haqq an Ehl-e Haqq (Bawermendên Rastiyê) kemîneyeke dînî ye li Îran û Îraqê ku kevneşopî û baweriyên wan di sedsa-la borî da bala akademîsyenan kişandiye.

Ev meqale bi kurtî li ser dîroka lêkolînên Yârsân û pêşveçûna wê ji destpêkê heya sala 2020an e. Herwiha di vê meqaleyê de hewldanên lêkolîneran ên ji bo têgihîştina vê baweriyê û bi kurtî rexneya li ser van hewldanên wan jî hatiye qalkirin.

**Peyvên Sereke:** Yarsan, Ehl-i Heqq, dînen Kurdan, baweriyên Kurdan, lêkolînên akademîk.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to the Geranpayeh (2006: 4): “The religion of the Yārsān is an Iranian religion that has its own peculiarities in its sacred poems and speeches, songs and rituals in the Middle East. The oral literature of the Yāristān, which also includes the description of their rituals, is in Gūrānī, in Handed down in Persian and in Loric as well as in a Turkish dialect.”

## 2. HISTORY OF RESEARCH

The first notes about Yārsān in the European languages can be found in the travel reports of travelers to the Orient in the 19th century (Sheil, 1856: 199.) and (Layard, 1853: 216).

Some called the group Ali Illahi. The word means “One who believes that ‘Ali is God’”. Such ideas are not accepted by orthodox Muslims; the Yāresān were often referred to as “extreme Shia” (Ghullāt).

Of all the reports, Rawlinson’s report is the most important. This is because Rawlinson described the sacred places and villages of Yārsān in his report, and we know, thanks to his report in 1836, that the belief in Yārsān was not only among the Kurds, but also among the Loren, who lived a nomadic life, was widespread (Rawlinson, 1939: 36).

Comte J.A. de Gobineau was the first person to attempt to look at the Yārsān in an academic way (1922). After the Sheil and Layard, Taylor mentioned the Ali Illahis in his travelogue (Taylor, 1865: 28-29).

Isabella Lucy Bird was another person, that she mentioned the Ali Illahis in his travelogue and called them the continuation of the Jews (Bird, 1891:85-86). After her Walter b. Harris in his travelogue, referred to the Ali Illahis as a mysterious sect and cult with mixed up beliefs of Judaism and Paganism and Islam (Harris, 1896: 271-272).

The next important author was Professor Valentin A. Zhukovskij, who had written about Ali Elāhi in his works.

At the very beginning of the 20th century (1904-1908), while working in the consular department in Tabriz, his student Vladimir Minorsky, wrote a report on Ahli Haqq, which translates into German “Materials for the Study of the Persian Sect”. “People of Truth” or “Ali Elāhi” was called, and in “Works of Eastern Studies of the Lazarevskij Institute of Eastern Languages” Issue XXXIII 1911., Материалы для изучения персидской секты” „Люди истины in”. „Труды по востоковедению, издаваемые Лазаревским Институтом Восточных языков” was published (Geranpayeh, 2006: 6).

Almost simultaneously with Minorsky, another Russian orientalist, Vladimir Alexeyevich Ivanow, started his research on Ahl-i Haqq. The two have attempted to detail Yārsān beliefs from a variety of sources of information, including personal observations and limited textual evidence (Kreyenbroek, 2020: 2). Apparently, Minorsky had access to a collection of religious texts drawn from a Yāresān community. He called them *Ketāb-e Saranjām* (Ivanow, 1953: 24-25 and Geranpayeh, 2006: 6-7 and Kreyenbroek, 2020: 2).

The text was probably written in 1843 and had 136 pages. He has never been published and his dating has never been verified.

Ivanov published, "The Truth-Worshippers of Kurdistan: Ahl-i Haqq Texts" in 1953. The book includes, "Tazkere-ye A'lā", that belonged to the Persian-speaking Ahl-i Haqq community, and also a "Resāles" that was written by a Khāksār-Dervish, initiated by the Yārsān (Kreyenbroek, 2020: 3).

Like Gobineau, Stead held that the origin of the Ali-Elahis was not Islamic, but probably Jewish or Christian (Stead, 1932: 184-189).

Minorsky was the first person to use the term "religion" for the Yārsān, thus calling them a religion in their own right (Minorsky, 1960: 260–263). He and Stead have shown that the Yārsān community consists of diverse religious groups whose beliefs sometimes differ.

A small group of the Yārsānen worship Ali, which is why some researchers have classified them among the "extreme Shi'ites" (Moossa, 1988: 185-194 and 245-255), where the majority rather maintains an old Iranian tradition.

In the Guran region, the Yārsān worshiped Seyyed Rostam, the grandson of Seyyed Brāke, as the incarnation of God (Stead, 1932: 184-189). At the time when Minorsky started working as a diplomat in Tabriz and Seyyed Rostam Heydarī Gūrān was the religious authority for some Guran tribes, Hājj Ne'matollāh Mokri Jeyhunābādi also lived as a reformer in the Ahl-i Haq community. He has attempted to openly explain and reinterpret the teachings of Yārsān in his written works. His views were not accepted by the majority of religious authorities and they recognized him as a heterodox among the Yārsānes. Although his views did not affect the Gurānas his teachings through his son and successor, Nur-Ali Elahi, and also his grandson, Dr. Bahram Elahi, found new believers among the non-Kurdish population in Iran and also among Europeans. The Book of Hājj Ne'matollāh, *Forqān al-Akhhbār* ("Criterion for distinguishing the traditions"), has been mentioned as a source since 1927 (Membrado, 2014) and has the understanding of Minorsky over Yāri Religion significantly influenced (Kreyenbroek, 2020: 4) Another important text from him, *Shāhnāme-ye Haqiqat*, (such as "The Great Epic of Truth"), was later published by Mohammad Mokri (Mokri, 1966). The old traditional texts were not

published in print until long after his passing. In the 1960s, Mohammad Mokri was a well-known researcher in the field of Yārsāns studies. Presumably he belonged to the followers of Nur-Ali Elahi. He published many writings from the Yāri tradition separately, not as a daftar or collection of texts (Mokri, 1967, 1974, 1977).

The music in the tradition of the followers of Nur-Ali Elahi was studied by Jean DURING, who had close ties with this Ahl-i Haqq order (DURING, 1989a, 1989b: 27–41).

Hamzeh'ee has shown the correlation between Yārsān and Zoroastrianism in his work (Hamzeh'ee, 1990) but he has not considered the heterogeneity of the Yarsan (Kreyenbroek, 2020: 4).

Despite differing traditions from Yārsān, there is at least one tradition that emphasizes the importance of pre-Islamic elements in their worldview. This was not studied by any western academic until 1990.

“The first evidence of the strong Yāri tradition in the Guran region came in the early 1990s with the work of Van Bruinessen and Mir-Hosseini (Mir-Hosseini, 1994b: 463–481 and 1996: 111–134).” (Kreyenbroek, 2020: 4)

Around the same time, Kreyenbroek has pointed out similarities between Zoroastrianism, Yezidism and Yārsān. (Kreyenbroek, 1992: 57–79, 1995b: 13–14, 1996a: 84–110, 1998: 163–84). The research in this Area has been enriched with the works of Kreyenbroek (Kreyenbroek, 2002b: 260–277, 2010a: 70–88, Kreyenbroek, 2014: 3–11, 2017: 55–64) and van Bruinessen (van Bruinessen, 2009: 51–58, 2014: 6–41, 2017: 65–93) and Shahab Vali (2011) in 21st century.

Kreyenbroek has attempted to point out similarities between the cosmogony of Roman Mithraism and the cosmogony of the Yārsān. According to his master theorem, aspects and elements of Mithraism from an Iranian religious tradition, but not belonging to Zoroastrianism and common in western Iranian regions, now encompassing the Kurdish lands, are said to survive in Yārsān and other religions of that region. He has also pointed out the similarities between Yezidiism, Yāresān and Alevism.

Mehrdad Izady claims that all these traditions (Yezidism, Yāresān and Alevism) go back to a “Cult of Angels”.

Later, Lawrence K. Robert in his article “*The Cults of the Angels: The Indigenous Religions of Kurdistan*” ([http://www.academia.edu/10772192/The\\_Cults\\_of\\_the\\_Angels\\_The\\_Indigenous\\_Religions\\_of\\_Kurdistan](http://www.academia.edu/10772192/The_Cults_of_the_Angels_The_Indigenous_Religions_of_Kurdistan)) also pointed out the similarities between Yezidism, Yāresān and Alevism.

Shahab Vali has examined doctrinal and mythological aspects of the Yārsān religion through a study of the last sacred texts in relation to the pre-Islamic religions of Iran (Vali, 2011). After that he examined the religious literature of the Yārsān in four articles. (Vali, 2012, 2014: 30–35, 2016: 113–119, 2017).

**Table 1: The Historical Researches of The Yārsān**

Date	Historical Research
1836	Rawlinson
1853	Austen Henry Layard
1856	lady Mary Leonora Woulfe Sheil, Sir Justin Sheil
1859	Gobinaeu
1865	Taylor
1891	Bird
1896	Harris
1858 - 1918	Zhukovskij
1904-1908	Minorsky (Work in Tabriz)
1911	Minorsky
1920	Minorsky
1920-1974	Nur-Ali Elahi, Reform
1921	Minorsky
1927	<i>Forqān al-Akhhbār</i> ("Criterion for the distinction of traditions") from Hājj Ne'matollāh
1928	Minorsky
1932	Stead
1948	Ivanow
1953	Minorsky
1953	Ivanow
1954	Minorsky
1960	Minorsky
1966	Mokri
1967	Mokri
1974	Mokri
1977	Mokri
1988	Moossa, Matti
1989	During
1990	Hamzeh>ee
1992	Van Bruinessen
1992	Kreyenbroek
1994	Mir-Hosseini
1995	Kreyenbroek
1995	Van Bruinessen
1996	Kreyenbroek
1996	Mir-Hosseini
1998	Kreyenbroek
2002	Kreyenbroek
2006	Geranpayeh

2009	Van Bruinessen
2010	Kreyenbroek
2011	Vali
2011	Robert L. K
2012	Vali
2014	Kreyenbroek
2014	Vali
2014	Van Bruinessen
2014	Membrado
2016	Vali
2017	Vali
2017	Kreyenbroek
2017	Van Bruinessen
2020	Kreyenbroek

### 3. CONCLUSION

As can be seen, Yārsān's studies have had various dimensions throughout history, from travelers reports to academics attempts to introduce Yārsān's beliefs and literature and sociological researchs. These researchs also has their weaknesses. Many of these travelers and researchers were interested to find their own belief, subjective interests or point of view in the beliefs of Yārsān.

Those who consider Yārsān to be a continuation of Judaism or Christianity are in this group. Another group interpreted Yārsān's beliefs and texts, and this made their researchs subjective.

Another group used the phenomenological method of religion studies according to the principle of empathy only and disregard the principle of epoch, that they led to an uncritical researchs on Yārsān's believe and text.

#### Notes:

1. Comte Joseph Arthur de Gobineau (14 Juli 1816 – 13 October 1882) French diplomat and traveller.
2. Valentin Aleksejevič Žukovskij (1858 – 1918) – Russian professor of Iranian studies.
3. Vladimir Fedorovich Minorsky (1877 – 1966) – the Russian diplomat and orientalist.
4. Wladimir Ivanow; November 3, 1886- June 19, 1970, Russian orientalist.
5. A Shi'a Sufi order residing in Iran and Iraq.
6. (1855-1934) was the religious leader of the Gūrāns from 1872 to 1934.

7. Hājī Ne‘matollāh Mokri Jeyhunābādi(1871-1920) Mystic and author of the Ahl-i Haqq order.
8. Nur-Ali Elahi (1895-1974) was an Iranian spiritual thinker, musician, philosopher and judge of Kurdish descent who dedicated his life to exploring the metaphysical dimension of human beings.
9. Religion of the Yārsāns.

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