



Ministry of Immigration  
and Integration

The Danish  
Immigration Service

# IRAN: The Yaresan

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## Introduction

The following report is a compilation of information regarding the Yaresan living in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The information presented is based primarily on interviews with two academic sources based in Germany. Additionally, carefully selected academic publications are included mainly for the purpose of providing general background information regarding the Yaresan in Iran. A list of the sources is included as Appendix A.

The report aims to address issues regarding the Yaresan that have been recurring in cases regarding Iranian asylum-seekers in Denmark. More specifically, the report focuses on the Iranian authorities' perception of Yari faith, prevalence of missionary activities among the Yaresan as well as activities aimed at awareness-raising about the situation of the Yaresan in Iran and the Iranian authorities' targeting of Yaresan and finally, prevalence of conversion to Christianity among the Yaresan in Iran. The terms of reference for this report are included as Appendix C.

Interviews with the two sources based in Germany, which comprise academics well-informed on the current situation of the Yaresan in Iran, took place in Göttingen and Heidelberg between February 23 and 24, 2017. They were informed about the purpose of the interviews and the fact that their statements would be included in a report to be made publicly available. The notes from the meetings were forwarded to the interlocutors for their approval and amendment, allowing the opportunity to offer corrections or comment their statements. Both notes have been validated by the sources, and the approved statements are found in their full extent in Appendix B. The two sources consulted are briefly presented in Appendix A.

Please note that while information from written sources is referenced with footnotes, the information provided by the oral sources is presented directly in the report itself.

This report is not and does not purport to be a comprehensive or detailed study of issues regarding the situation of the Yaresan in Iran. Neither is the report conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Finally, the report does not include any policy recommendations or analysis.

## 1. The Yaresan in Iran

Followers of Yari faith, the Yaresan, in Iran are most commonly known as the '*Ahl-e Haqq*' in Iran.<sup>1</sup> The group often call themselves a '*tayefe*' (meaning tribe or group) or '*Yaresan*'.<sup>2</sup> Other appellations employed for followers of Yari faith are '*Aliullahi*' or '*Ali-Ilahi*' (one who believes that Ali is God).<sup>3</sup> In the report at hand, the appellation Yaresan is employed throughout for followers of the Yari faith.<sup>4</sup>

Yari faith has its roots in the Kurdish area of Iran, and its traditions, beliefs and myths have retained ancient Iranian elements. The Yaresan are not unified in their beliefs, and different branches exist in the Yaresan tradition. One cardinal difference within the Yaresan communities is the question of association and nearness to Islam of their Yari faith.<sup>5</sup>

### 1.1. The Yaresan in Iran – two main groups

According to Dr. Philip Kreyenbroek and Dr. Gomorad Moradi, the Yaresan of Iran are divided into two main groups which differ both in their religious outlook and their relationship with the Iranian authorities. These two groups are labelled by these sources as 'modernist'/'reformed' and 'traditionalist' branches of Yaresan. Whilst the 'modernist' branch, who are mainly city-centered well-educated Yaresan, consider their faith as a version of Shia Islam, the 'traditionalist' Yaresan who are mostly from the country-side of Kermanshah province perceive Yari faith as a non-muslim religion.

Dr. Philip Kreyenbroek, Professor and Director of Iranian Studies Georg-August University of Göttingen, explained that the Yaresan in Iran were divided into two distinct groups: 'modernist'<sup>6</sup> and 'traditionalist'.

According to Dr. Philip Kreyenbroek, historically, a rift emerged among the Yaresan with the teachings put forward by Hajj Ne'matollah Jayhunabadi (1871-1920) in the late 1800's. These teachings broke with the Yaresan communities' beliefs and traditions within Yari faith and had lasting consequences for the Yaresan. The source explained that Jayhunabadi was not of a so-called Sayyed family, that is a family of a religious leader, and therefore not in a position to transmit religious knowledge, according to Yari tradition. In his teachings, Jayhunabadi in many ways asserted that the Yaresan were Muslims and reconciled Yari faith with Shi'ism. A large number of people became his followers both in Sahneh of Kermanshah, a traditional Yaresan area where Jayhunabadi came from, and outside of Sahneh, particularly in city centers. With his teachings, a 'modernist' branch of Yari religion was established which also took in outsiders of non-Yaresani origin, among whom many were intellectuals. Jayhunabadi's teachings were furthered by his son Nur Ali Elahi (1895-1974) and Elahi's own son Bahram Elahi (1931-). Followers of this 'modernist' version come mainly from an educated class both in Iran and in the West, particularly in France where Paris has become a center of their activities.

The 'traditionalist' Yaresan, who are concentrated in the Guran area of Kermanshah in Iran, on the other hand, reject the idea that Yari faith can be considered a version of Shia Islam. This group has always been closed to outsiders, and still remains closed today, according to Dr. Philip Kreyenbroek.

The claim made by the 'modernists' that the Yaresan are Muslims, i.e. a Shiite community, has among other things been key to tensions between the 'traditionalist' Yaresan communities and this reformed branch. Disputes remain between the two branches as to which version of Yari faith is the 'right' one.

Dr. Golmorad Moradi confirmed that the Yaresan can be divided into two groups: one which is 'traditionalist' and one that follows a more reformed branch of Yari faith, i.e. those that are followers of Bahram Elahi. This last group concerns the branch which has attempted to adapt to Shiism. Bahram Elahi, son of Nur-Ali Elahi and grandson of Nematollah Jayhunabadi, is now living in Paris and the official stance from this group is that it does not wish to be politicized. The source explained that Nur-Ali Elahi himself had been a judge at the courts of law in Khorramabad and in Larestan in Iran, therefore an official of the Iranian government apparatus.

The perception of distinct groups within the Yaresan is supported by publications from other scholars who have conducted research on the subject of Yari faith. Ziba Mir-Hosseini states in her earlier research on the subject (1994):

*"One sub-sect consists of rural and tribal people, mostly of Kurdish background, who were born into Ahl-i Haqq. They have long been regarded as heretics by their Sh'ite and Sunnite neighbours and, for this reason, have remained secretive about their beliefs and practices. Their number is estimated to be as many as one million, mostly living in southern parts of Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan as well as in Iranian Luristan and Azarbaijan."*<sup>7</sup>

*The other sub-sect is quite different. It consists of educated and urban Iranians who were attracted to Ahl-i Haqq in the late 1960s. This was when one of its spiritual leaders, 'All IlahT, published an account of the sect's doctrines and rites, reformulated by his reforming father, Haj Ni'mat. To this sub-sect, unlike the first, the special appeal of Ahl-i Haqq is more mystical, less practical. The number of new converts who do not have Kurdish origins is growing both inside and outside Iran. Iranians living in exile after the revolution seem to be particularly attracted to the sect: in Paris, and to a lesser degree in London, Rome and New York, they form groups who meet regularly to celebrate Ahl-i Haqq rituals"*<sup>8</sup>.

Mehrdad R. Izady, author of *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook* (1992) similarly explains in his chapter regarding the Yari faith that the faith is divided in 'two or three, very unequal sects', one which is traditionalist.<sup>9</sup> These 'sects' are categorized as follows in his book:

*"1) The Ahl-i Haq have been increasingly identified with mainstream Shi'ite Islam, yet follow for their religious instruction the mystic order led by Nurali Ilahi (himself a minor avatar, d. 1974) and his father Ni'matullah Jayhunabadi. Nurali Ilahi is the author of the venerated book Burhan which serves as the religious manual for the Ahl-i Haq.*

...

*2) The Tayifasan have only recently begun to associate with the pragmatic approach and teachings of Nurali vis-à-vis Islam. However, they are not as enthusiastic about an open association with Shi'ism as Ahl-i Haq. Nurali claims the Tayifasan to be his followers, not very different from the Ahl-i Haq. These two groups are the most urban and urbane of the Yarsan sects, and show the most influence from modern Iranian society. Their small branch in Iraq follows their lead."*<sup>10</sup>

3) *The traditionalists consist of the commoners and village folk, who constitute the overwhelming majority, and call themselves the Yarsan, but also on occasion the Nusayri or Aliullahi. They are most readily targeted for abuse by their Muslim neighbors, but they are also the ones who are most faithful to the tenets of the ancient religion. They make no pretense to be Muslims.*<sup>11</sup>

## 1.2. Geography

In Iran, the Yaresan are mainly concentrated in the province of Kermanshah with estimates of approximately half a million Yaresanis.<sup>12</sup> Groups of Yaresan also live in other areas of Iran, including West Azarbaijan, Lorestan, Tehran, Hamadan, Kelardasht, Karaj and Saveh.<sup>13</sup> There are no accurate estimates of the size of the Yaresan community in Iran, and numbers range from one to four million.<sup>14</sup>

The area of Guran [also spelled Goran *ed.*] in the western part of Kermanshah, where the Yari faith has its origins and where many of sites considered holy to the Yaresan are located, has the ‘most dense concentration’ of Yaresan. In the eastern part of Kermanshah, in the town of Sahneh and its surrounding villages, another Yaresan community is found.<sup>15</sup>

Anthropologist and scholar from SOAS University of London, Ziba Mir Hosseini explains in her article (1994) regarding the Yaresan group that lives in the area of Guran:

*“..This area, with the most dense concentration of the Ahl-i Haqq in Iran, has a population of once nomadic but now settled tribes: the Guran and Qalkhani (all of whom are Ahl-i Haqq), Sanjabi (90 per cent), and some sections of the Kalhur, Jalilvand and Usmanvand. Because of both their geographical situation and their tribal structure, the Ahl-i Haqq communities of Guran remained highly isolated and relatively autonomous until early this century; and since the mid-nineteenth century they have been under the religious leadership of one single Sayyid family, the Haydaris.”<sup>16</sup>*

Concerning the group that lives in the eastern part of the province, Dr. Mir-Hosseini further explains (1994):

*“The second Ahl-i Haqq cluster is found in the eastern part of the province, in the town of Sahneh and its surrounding villages. Administratively, Sahneh is a district centre within the central sub-province of Kermanshah, and is the only town there with a predominantly Ahl-i Haqq population. The Ahl-i Haqq of Sahneh district are not only fewer but less isolated and more prosperous; here Ahl-i Haqq communities have a peasant composition and do not include any tribes of the region.”<sup>17</sup>*

Based on existing publications regarding the community by scholars and own counts of cities/towns with Yaresan communities, Dr. Golmorad Moradi approximated the population of the Yaresan to number roughly two and half millions in Iran. This number includes adherents of both ‘traditionalist’ Yaresan and the reformed branch, that is followers of Elahi. Those who follow the latter are centered around the cities of Tehran, Karaj and Hashtgerd while the ‘traditionalist’ Yaresan have their origin in the provincial areas of Kermanshah, including the area of Guran. Dr. Golmoradi Moradi, however, added that one also found ‘traditionalist’ Yaresan in Tehran, Karaj and Hashtgerd, and about 25 per cents or more of Yaresan living in these cities belonged to the ‘traditionalist’ group. Due to its intellectual background, the reformed branch

has been in a position to give the impression that it outnumbers the ‘traditionalist’ Yaresan group in followers. However, in reality it makes up a smaller percentage of the Yaresan population on the whole, according to Dr. Moradi.

## 2. Treatment by the authorities

### 2.1. Iranian authorities’ perception of Yari belief

Professor Dr. Philip G. Kreyenbroek said that the issues of Yaresan identity and its relationship with the authorities became particularly problematic with the establishment of the Islamic Republic (1979) when Twelver Shi’ism became the official state religion of Iran. After the revolution, one of Iran’s objectives became to secure the borders with Iraq through among others ‘islamizing’ its border areas, and thereby the populations living in these areas. Against this background, the existence of a minority such as Yaresan living in border areas, whose beliefs deviated from the official state religion, became more problematic in the view of the new Islamic regime. In short, those groups who were not perceived as ‘good’ Shiites, could be regarded as traitors.

Regarding the authorities’ perception of Yari belief, Dr. Philip Kreyenbroek asserted that the ‘modernist’ Yaresan, (i.e. followers of Elahi) externally defined themselves as Shiites and distanced themselves from elements of the traditional Yari faith. According to the source, the authorities regard this community as ‘maktabi’, that is belonging to a religious school which is in line with the state version of Islam, and therefore as acceptable while the ‘traditionalist’ Yaresan are called ‘*shaytan-parast*’, i.e., devil-worshippers.<sup>18</sup> The fact that the authorities see the ‘traditionalist’ Yaresan as devil-worshippers entails that they do not consider them Muslim.

According to Dr. Golmoradi Moradi, the Iranian authorities view the ‘traditionalist’ Yaresan as a non-Muslim group and do not recognize the [faith of this] minority as a religion. Outside of their homes and their holy places, the Yaresan present themselves as Muslims. In their interaction with Iranian authorities and government institutions, the Yaresan register themselves as Muslims, for example in connection with registration for official documents or in connection with education and application for jobs.

The source said that the Yaresan would not stand a chance at getting an education or employment, should they choose to do otherwise and assert their identities as Yaresan. Such an individual would not have access to institutes of higher learning or positions in the public sector. However, most of the two and half millions Yaresan in Iran live like many others do, i.e. keeping their Yari identity and belief within the four walls of their home and behaving like a Muslim outside the walls of the home. Accessing higher education or positions in the public sector would therefore not be an issue for them. According to the source, one of the main reasons why many Yaresanis seek refuge in foreign countries is that they do not want to continue lying about their identity and belief as Yaresan and they do not want their children to grow up in such conditions. If it somehow is uncovered that a person is a Yaresani by the authorities or others affiliated with the authorities, problems could arise and a person might be unable to continue his or her education or be dismissed from his or her job in the public sector.

According to Dr. Philip G. Kreyenbroek, Yaresan communities have in certain periods been pressured to associate with Islam more openly. Examples include requirements from Iranian authorities to put up pictures of holy Shiite figures such as Imam Hossein at holy sites of Yaresan and the erection of mosques in villages populated almost exclusively by Yaresan communities, enforcing calls to daily prayers in a community that does not follow the five pillars of Islam.

Dr. Philip G. Kreyenbroek considered that previous government efforts towards Islamizing 'traditionalist' Yaresan communities had lessened, mainly because the influence of the dominant Shia culture exists in and of itself. Traditional Yaresan communities are not immune to the influences of the dominant cultural trends of Iranian society, and these communities and their traditions are therefore in many ways under pressure. For example, Yari weddings and funerals today look very much like Shiite ones. The communities are no longer as isolated as earlier due to cultural influences by way of television for instance, and migration to central areas of Iran.

## **2.2. Yaresan targeted by the authorities**

Regarding possible consequences of asserting Yaresan identity publicly and talking about Yari faith as a non-Muslim religion in public, Dr. Philip Kreyenbroek explained that the group was not targeted as a whole and "it is not the case that the authorities systematically harass and arrest people because they are followers of Yari faith". According to the source, repression and persecution comes up in individual cases where for example the head of a community and other profiled individuals may experience pressure from the authorities. In the past years, there have been a number of incidents of harassment and maltreatment of the Yaresan by the authorities.<sup>19</sup> Recently, a famous tambour<sup>20</sup> musician wanted to open a cultural center for tambour music, however the authorities continuously harassed him in many different ways. The government does from time to time take measures against the Yaresan community much the same way as it does against Sufi orders for example, and it does occur that outspoken individuals are arrested because of identifying themselves as Yaresan publicly.

The source further explained that it was difficult to establish whether persecution of individual Yari-believers was based on suspicions of religious identity or political grounds. Expression of Kurdish identity is a very sensitive issue in Iran and as many Yaresan are of Kurdish ethnic origin, it can be difficult to ascertain on which basis an individual is targeted, i.e. political, religious or both.

Dr. Philip Kreyenbroek underlined, however, that in Iran, the way that the government treated minorities was not static, rather it was subject to varying trends and situation and thereby could change over time. For example, while the government in some periods may be sensitive towards any public expression of Yari faith, in others it may take a more relaxed stance towards such expression. Today, the Iranian regime in general tries to deal with the issue of religious and ethnic minorities in a different and less harsh way than it did during the 1980s, according to Dr. Philip Kreyenbroek.

Dr. Golmoradi Moradi stated that he had noticed that the younger generation of the Yaresan community in Iran had begun to show an interest in learning more about Yari faith. Specifically, he had through contacts in Iran heard of an increase in the interest for written materials about the 'traditionalist' version of Yari faith. Dr. Moradi said that these sorts of texts would be considered illegal in Iran, while the works of Elahi and his followers were not illegal and they had been reprinted several times.



Dr. Moradi explained that Yaresanis who were considered of interest by the authorities and that could risk being targeted were those who publicly and actively asserted their Yari identity and religion. He further said that although the Yaresan, according to their faith, were not allowed to lie about their faith and their identity as Yaresan, the vast majority of almost two and half millions of the Yaresan were forced to do so, or faced problems with the authorities. If an individual is active, religiously or politically or both, and for example is caught in possession of materials considered illicit, he or she could face arrest and interrogation by the authorities. Typically, he or she would consequently be ordered to discontinue any such activities or face prison. The source added that sites considered holy to the Yaresan had been subject to vandalism in Kermanshah at the hands of the authorities.

Dr. Moradi found that although followers of the Elahi branch had attempted to associate with Shiism, the group had not been entirely free from harassment and maltreatment at the hands of the authorities. Followers of this branch of Yari faith are treated much the same way as followers of certain Sufi brotherhoods, for example Gonabadi Sufi order that from time to time is the object of crackdowns, for example through the authorities' harassment and arrest of its leaders.

### 3. Missionary activities of the Yaresan

#### 3.1. The Yaresan's knowledge of Yari faith

Regarding the knowledge of Yaresan about their Yari religion, Dr. Philip Kreyenbroek said that layman's knowledge was somewhat limited and that it was primarily the religious leaders, the so-called Sayyeds who possessed knowledge about the religion.

Dr. Kreyenbroek explains in 2014 in the publication *'Religious Minorities in Kurdistan: Beyond the Mainstream'* (Omarkhali (ed.)):

*" Ordinary people may obtain some insight into higher things by participating in the community's central ritual, the 'jam'.<sup>21'</sup>*

...

*'While few lay people are aware of religious knowledge in detail, most know the outlines of the Yaresan worldview, its sacred history and great myths.'*

According to Dr. Golmoradi Moradi, the concept of *'serr magoo'* [i.e. the secret knowledge of Yari faith which should not be revealed to outsiders ed.] does not, as has been claimed in some works, make reference to a secrecy that permeates the belief as a rule, but is rather the product of a historical adjustment to surrounding circumstances. Historically, the secrecy surrounding Yari faith and its traditions derived from a fear of repercussions from surrounding hostile communities.

Dr. Moradi said that another historical reason why the notion of secrecy *'serr magoo'* came to characterize the Yari religion stemmed from interaction with Western anthropologists and religionists who wanted to study the Yari faith in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to the source, when anthropologists and researchers asked the Yaresan religious leaders about Yari faith, these leaders answered that they could not inform the

researchers about their religion as it was a secret knowledge which was not supposed to be revealed to outsiders. However, according to Dr. Moradi, the religious leaders did in fact not have much knowledge to relay about their religion and hid behind this concept of secrecy. Even today, religious leaders of the Yaresan typically do not possess extensive knowledge about the religion, according to the source.

### **3.2. Conversion to Yari faith and missionary activities**

According to Dr. Philip Kreyenbroek, the 'modernist' Yaresan are open to accepting individuals who wish to convert to their faith, especially in the bigger cities such as Tehran. They proselytize both among Iranians and non-Iranians, and their converts seem to be mostly well-educated, middle class individuals, both male and female.<sup>22</sup> This is not, by the Iranian authorities, considered an attempt to turn individuals away from Islam. The authorities consider the 'modernist' Yarsan '*maktabi*', that is belonging to a religious school which is in line with the state version of Islam, and therefore allowing people into their communities is not seen as a threat.

On the other hand, according to the belief of the 'traditionalist' Yaresan, Yaresan are born into their faith and entry into the religious group is not possible. There can be exceptional cases, for example where a religious Yaresan leader has permitted an outsider to join the community for the purpose of marriage to a person of Yari faith.

Concerning activities related to proselytization of Yari faith, the source stated that the 'traditionalist' Yaresan do not proselytize in any way. Besides, such activities, if carried out, would also lead to confrontations with the authorities. One could compare the situation with that of Yezidis and Zoroastrians where proselytization does not in any way take place.

On the topic of whether the Yaresan conduct missionary activities, Dr. Golmoradi Moradi said that neither the 'reformist' nor the 'traditionalist' Yaresan made attempts at converting others or at encouraging others to follow them. However, Dr. Moradi considered that if an individual wanted to convert to Yari faith, none of the two main groups of Yaresan would refuse to accept the conversion and let the convert into their communities. The reason behind this is, according to Dr. Moradi, that there is no evidence in the Yari religious scriptures that conversion to Yari faith is prohibited or that Yaresan are only born into the faith. However, the Yaresan community do not propagate or encourage others to convert to Yari religion, according to Dr. Moradi.

Dr. Moradi emphasized that conversion to Yaresan was a phenomenon that merely took place outside of Iran where non-Yaresanis contacted Yaresani religious leaders and requested conversion. Dr. Moradi explained lack of conversion to Yari faith in Iran by saying that if it was uncovered by the authorities that a person had converted to Yari faith, he or she would likely face reprisals, including death sentence, from the authorities. For this obvious reason, individuals do not convert to Yari faith in Iran.

Both the 'traditionalist' and 'reformist' Yaresan have private ceremonies and it is the assessment of Dr. Moradi that outsiders would usually not be able to walk in and participate in ceremonies, unless they were on familiar terms with a Yaresani who would take to these ceremonies. Invited outsiders can stand in the background and watch the ceremony, however he or she would not be able to sit down and join the ceremony.

According to Dr. Moradi, the Yaresan are able to gather for their ceremonies (*'Jam'*) on Fridays. The source added that an outsider could participate in these ceremonies if a local Yarsani knew him and came together with him. The outsider could not sit and participate in the ceremony, but only stand in the back and observe. It was added that these ceremonies would typically take place with the presence of a plainclothes person with ties to the authorities, and the local Yaresan would usually know such person. The ceremonies can, therefore, take place, however they are surveilled.

According to Dr. Philip Kreyenbroek, in order to be invited into 'traditionalist' Yaresan communities and for example be present at ceremonies and rites, an outsider would need a rapport with individuals in the community: "they should know who you are to invite you".

#### **4. Activities aimed at raising awareness of the situation of the Yaresan**

Professor Dr. Philip Kreyenbroek said that some years back, there were some activities among the 'traditionalist' Yaresan communities in Iran aimed at raising awareness about the situation of the minority of Yaresan. In 2013, the official head of the Yaresan community in the area of Guran discouraged such efforts, stating that they were unacceptable. He argued among other things that Yaresani sacred texts were not to be revealed publicly and distributed in connection with consciousness raising activities.

It was the impression of Dr. Philip Kreyenbroek that a certain amount of awareness-raising activities about the situation of Yaresan was carried out by the [Yari] diaspora outside of Iran. For example, Yaresan who live in European countries, like Norway, have made efforts to raise awareness of the situation and strengthen convictions in Iran.

According to Dr. Golmoradi Moradi, the extent of activities aimed at raising awareness of the situation of the Yaresan in Iran is not that much when comparing with that of the Baha'i community for example. It was the assessment of Dr. Moradi that generally, the Yaresan in Iran did not have many active members who conducted activities aimed at raising awareness of the minority's situation, both religiously and politically. He considered that the number of politically active Yaresanis in Iran did not exceed one hundred individuals. Dr. Moradi added that the Yaresan had a tendency to hide their religion when interacting with the Iranian authorities to avoid harassment and difficulties with the authorities, while there were more examples of Baha'is standing fast on their conviction and Baha'i identity when confronted by the authorities.

Dr. Moradi said that the few that conducted activities aimed at highlighting the situation of the Yaresan did so in groups that on the surface did not resemble groups with a political agenda. The source added that there were examples of cases where individuals had carried out awareness-raising activities and as a consequence had been arrested and maltreated. Dr. Moradi mentioned two cases regarding women who had been arrested by the authorities for such reasons: a woman from Kermanshah was arrested last week (mid February 2017) and held in detention for two days and upon being released she committed suicide. Two years ago (2015), a female student had stood up at an event where President Rouhani was present and spoken up about the rights for the Yaresan minority. She was later taken into custody in Kermanshah where she came from and moved to custody in Tehran. Upon being sent back to Kermanshah, she was put under house arrest, and the security forces told her parents that she may be called to Tehran later on. A few

months later, when she was told to present herself to the authorities in Tehran within a week, she committed suicide. Dr. Moradi assumed that both women were subjected to mistreatment in detention, which he considered as the main reason behind their suicides.

Dr. Moradi said that if a person was suspected of being active in promoting rights for the Yaresan, he or she would risk being the object of harassment and persecution at the hands of the government. Dr. Moradi mentioned a dentist, who was a Yaresani whom the authorities harassed continuously because he was vocal on the situation of Yaresan in Iran.

## **5. Conversion to Christianity among Yaresan**

Professor Dr. Philip Kreyenbroek had not heard of Christian missionary activities taking place in areas where Yaresan communities lived and considered that if it did take place, there would be very few who would convert. It was highlighted that in a society where family and community ties were important, conversion could lead to ostracism from the family.

With regard to how the authorities might perceive a conversion to Christianity from Yari faith, the source considered that if an individual that the authorities regarded as non-Muslim were to convert to Christianity, he or she would not likely be treated as an apostate. For instance, if a Bahai were to convert to Christianity, he or she would, according to Islamic law, not be regarded as an apostate. The same would be the case for a 'traditionalist' Yaresani who converted to Christianity. The source underlined that this assumption was entirely speculative and that he did not have any knowledge of specific cases. In addition, he emphasized that the interpretation of Islamic law was not always consistent, making it difficult to give definite answers about the authorities' reaction to conversion.

Dr. Golmoradi Moradi said that he had never heard of Christian missionaries being active in Yaresan-populated areas of Iran.

Dr. Moradi found that according to the Yari religion, there were generally no written rules that prohibited conversion to other religions. However, Dr. Moradi considered that conversion to another religion would not be welcomed among the Yaresan.

## Appendix A: Sources

### Oral sources

**Professor Dr. Philip G. Kreyenbroek**, *Professor and Director of Iranian Studies Georg-August University of Göttingen (1996-2017), has since 1996 been Professor of Iranian Studies at Göttingen University. Dr. Kreyenbroek has conducted extensive research in the field of minority religions among the Kurds including the situation of Yaresan in Iran. Dr. Kreyenbroek has studied Arabic and Persian as well as Kurdish language and conducted several field studies in the Kurdish areas of Iran.*

**Dr. Golmoradi Moradi**, *Ph.D. from the University of Heidelberg, has worked as a lecturer at the University of Heidelberg, Hamburg and Bremen and taught Kurdish history, basic Kurdish language for foreign students and Persian language. He has worked extensively on issues regarding the Yaresan and authored several books on issues related to Kurdish history and the Yaresan. He is also spokesperson of the Cultural Association of Yaresan Community Abroad, an organization also registered in Sweden (Eskilstrup). For eight years, Dr. Moradi was also member of the Councils ('Hai'at Dabiran') of Iranian PEN in Exile.*

### Written Sources

Izady, Mehrdad R., *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook*, Taylor & Francis Publishers, 1992

Omarkhali, Khanna, *Religious Minorities in Kurdistan: Beyond the Mainstream*, Harrassowitz Verlag, Weisbaden, 2014

Mir Hosseini, Ziba, *Redefining the Truth: The Ahl-i Haqq and the Islamic Republic of Iran*, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 21, No. 2, Taylor & Francis Ltd., 1994

## Appendix B: Meeting Notes

### Professor Dr. Philip G. Kreyenbroek, Iranian Studies Georg-August University of Göttingen, February 23, 2017, Göttingen, Germany

*Professor Dr. Philip G. Kreyenbroek, Professor and Director of Iranian Studies Georg-August University of Göttingen (1996-2017), has since 1996 been Professor of Iranian Studies at Göttingen University. Dr. Kreyenbroek has conducted extensive research in the field of minority religions among the Kurds including the situation of Yaresan in Iran. Dr. Kreyenbroek has studied Arabic and Persian as well as Kurdish language and conducted several field studies in the Kurdish areas of Iran.*

#### Two main groups of Yaresan

Regarding the Yaresan community, Dr. Philip Kreyenbroek, Professor and Director of Iranian Studies Georg-August University of Göttingen, explained that the Yaresan in Iran are divided into two distinct groups: 'modernist' and 'traditionalist'.

According to the source, historically, a rift emerged among the Yaresan with the teachings put forward by Hajj Ne'matollah Jayhunabadi (1871-1920) in the late 1800's. These teachings broke with the Yaresan communities' beliefs and traditions within Yari faith and had lasting consequences for the Yaresan. The source explained that Jayhunabadi was not of a so-called Sayyed family, that is a family of a religious leader, and therefore not in a position to transmit religious knowledge, according to Yari tradition. In his teachings, Jayhunabadi in many ways asserted that the Yaresan were Muslims and reconciled Yari faith with Shi'ism. A large number of people became his followers both in Sahneh of Kermanshah, a traditional Yaresan area where Jayhunabadi came from, and outside of Sahneh, particularly in city centers. With his teachings, a 'modernist' branch of Yari religion was established which also took in outsiders of non-Yaresani origin, among whom many were intellectuals. Jayhunabadi's teachings were furthered by his son Nur Ali Elahi (1895-1974) and Elahi's own son Bahram Elahi (1931-). Followers of this 'modernist' version come mainly from an educated class both in Iran and in the West, particularly in France where Paris has become a center of their activities.

The traditionalist Yaresan, who are concentrated in the Guran area of Kermanshah in Iran, on the other hand, reject the idea that Yari faith can be considered a version of Shia Islam. This group had always been closed to outsiders, and still remains closed today.

The 'modernists' claim that the Yaresan are Muslims, i.e. a Shiite community, has among other things been key to tensions between the 'traditionalist' Yaresan communities and this reformed branch. Disputes remain between the two branches as to which version of Yari faith is the 'right' one.

#### Iranian authorities' perception of Yaresan/Ahl-i Haq

Professor Dr. Philip G. Kreyenbroek said that the issues of Yaresan identity and its relationship with the authorities became particularly problematic with the establishment of the Islamic Republic (1979) when Twelver Shi'ism became the official state religion of Iran. After the revolution, one of Iran's objectives became to secure the borders with Iraq through among others 'islamizing' its border areas, and thereby the

populations living in these areas. Against this background, the existence of a minority such as Yaresan living in border areas whose beliefs deviated from the official state religion became more problematic in the view of the new Islamic regime. In short, those groups who were not perceived as 'good' Shiites, could be regarded as traitors.

Regarding the authorities' perception of Yari belief, Dr. Philip Kreyenbroek asserted that the 'modernist' Yaresan, (i.e. followers of Elahi) externally define themselves as Shiites and have distanced themselves from elements of the traditional Yari faith. The authorities regard this community as 'maktabi', that is belonging to a religious school which is in line with the state version of Islam, and therefore as acceptable, while the 'traditionalist' Yaresan are called 'shaytan-parast', i.e., devil-worshippers. 23 The fact that the authorities see the 'traditionalist' Yaresan as devil-worshippers entails that they do not consider them Muslim.

According to Dr. Philip G. Kreyenbroek, Yaresan communities have in certain periods been pressured to associate with Islam more openly. Examples include requirements from Iranian authorities to put up pictures of holy Shiite figures such as Imam Hossein at holy sites of Yaresan and the erection of mosques in villages populated almost exclusively by Yaresan communities, enforcing calls to daily prayers in a community that does not follow the five pillars of Islam.

The source considered that previous government efforts towards Islamizing 'traditionalist' Yaresan communities have lessened, mainly because the influence of the dominant Shia culture exists in and of itself. Traditional Yaresan communities are not immune to the influences of the dominant cultural trends of Iranian society, and these communities and their traditions are therefore in many ways under pressure. For example, Yarsani weddings and funerals today look very much like Shiite ones. The communities are no longer as isolated as earlier due to cultural influences by way of television for instance, and migration to central areas of Iran.

#### Missionary activities of Yaresan

Dr. Kreyenbroek said that the 'modernist' Yaresan are open to accepting individuals who wish to convert to their faith, especially in the bigger cities such as Tehran. They proselytize both among Iranians and non-Iranians, and their converts seem to be mostly well-educated, middle class individuals, both male and female. This is not, by the Iranian authorities, considered an attempt to turn individuals away from Islam. The authorities consider the "modernist" Yarsan 'maktabi' and therefore allowing people into their communities is not seen as a threat.

On the other hand, according to the belief of the 'traditionalist' Yaresan, Yaresan are born into their faith and entry into the religious group is not possible. There can be exceptional cases, for example where a religious Yaresan leader has permitted an outsider to join the community for the purpose of marriage to a person of Yari faith.

In order to be invited into 'traditionalist' Yaresan communities and for example be present at ceremonies and rites, an outsider would need a rapport with individuals in the community: "they should know who you are to invite you".

Concerning activities related to proselytization of Yari faith, the source stated that the 'traditionalist' Yaresan do not proselytize in any way. Besides, such activities, if carried out, would also lead to

confrontations with the authorities. One could compare the situation with that of Yezidis and Zoroastrians where proselytization does not in any way take place.

Regarding the knowledge of Yaresan about their Yari religion, the source said that layman's knowledge is somewhat limited and that it is primarily the religious leaders, the so-called Sayyeds who possess knowledge about the religion.

#### Activities aimed at raising awareness of the situation of the Yaresan in Iran

Professor Dr. Philip Kreyenbroek said that some years back, there were some activities among the 'traditionalist' Yaresan communities in Iran aimed at raising awareness about the situation of the minority of Yaresan. In 2013, the official head of the Yaresan community in the area of Guran discouraged such efforts, stating that they were unacceptable. He argued among other things, that Yaresani sacred texts were not to be revealed publicly and distributed in connection with consciousness raising activities.

It was the impression of the source that a certain amount of awareness-raising about the situation of Yaresan is carried out by the diaspora outside of Iran. For example, Yaresan who live in European countries, like Norway, have made efforts to raise awareness of the situation and strengthen convictions in Iran.

#### Yaresan targeted by the Iranian authorities

Regarding possible consequences of asserting Yaresan identity publicly and talking about Yari faith as a non-Muslim religion in public, the source explained that the group is not targeted as a whole and "it is not the case that the authorities systematically harass and arrest people because they are followers of Yari faith". According to the source, repression and persecution is targeted and comes up in individual cases where for example the head of a community and other profiled individuals may experience pressure from the authorities. In the past years, there were a number of incidents of harassment and maltreatment of the Yaresan by the authorities. Recently, a famous tambour<sup>24</sup> musician wanted to open a cultural center for tambour music, however the authorities continuously harassed him in many different ways. The government does from time to time take measures against the Yaresan community much the same way as it does against Sufi orders for example, and it does occur that outspoken individuals are arrested because of identifying themselves as Yaresan publicly.

The source further explained that it is difficult to establish whether persecution of individual Yari-believers was based on suspicions of religious identity or political grounds. Expression of Kurdish identity is a very sensitive issue in Iran and as many Yaresan are of Kurdish ethnic origin, it can be difficult to ascertain on which basis an individual is targeted, i.e. political, religious or both.

The source underlined, however, that in Iran, the way that the government treats minorities is not static, rather it is subject to varying trends and situation and thereby can change over time. For example, while the government in some periods may be sensitive towards any public expression of Yari faith, in others it may take a more relaxed stance towards such expression. The source found that today, the Iranian regime in general tries to deal with the issue of religious and ethnic minorities in a different and less harsh way than it did during the 1980s.

#### Prevalence of Christian missionary activities among Yaresan



Professor Dr. Philip Kreyenbroek had not heard of Christian missionary activities taking place in areas where Yaresan communities live and considered that if it did take place, there would be very few who would convert. It was highlighted that in a society where family and community ties are important, conversion could lead to ostracism from the family.

With regard to how the authorities might perceive a conversion to Christianity from Yari faith, the source considered that if an individual that the authorities regarded as non-Muslim were to convert to Christianity, he or she would not likely be treated as an apostate. For instance, if a Bahai were to convert to Christianity, he or she would, according to Islamic law, not be regarded as an apostate. The same would be the case for a 'traditionalist' Yaresani who converts to Christianity. The source underlined that this assumption is entirely speculative and that he did not have any knowledge of specific cases. In addition, he emphasized that the interpretation of Islamic law is not always consistent, making it difficult to give definite answers about the authorities' reaction to conversion.

### **Dr. Golmorad Moradi, Ph.D, February 24, 2017, Heidelberg, Germany**

Dr. Golmoradi Moradi, Ph.D. from the University of Heidelberg, has worked as a lecturer at the University of Heidelberg, Hamburg and Bremen and taught Kurdish history, basic Kurdish language for foreign students and Persian language. He has worked extensively on issues regarding the Yaresan and authored several books on issues related to Kurdish history and the Yaresan. He is also spokesperson of the Cultural Association of Yaresan Community Abroad, an organization also registered in Sweden (Eskilstrup). For eight years, Dr. Moradi was also member of the Councils (*'Hai'at Dabiran'*) of Iranian PEN in Exile.

Among other tasks, as spokesperson for the Cultural Association of Yarsan Community Abroad, he is entrusted with writing letters of confirmation concerning individuals in Europe who are in need of confirmation of their Yaresan identity, for example in connection with applications for asylum.

#### Two groups of the Yaresan

Dr. Moradi confirmed that the Yaresan can be divided into two groups: one which is 'traditionalist' and one that follows a more reformed branch of Yari faith, i.e. those that are followers of Bahram Elahi. This last group concerns the branch which has attempted to adapt to Shiism. Bahram Elahi, son of Nur-Ali Elahi and grandson of Nematollah Jayhunabadi, is now living in Paris and the official stance from this group is that it does not wish to be politicized. The source explained that Nur-Ali Elahi himself was a Judge at the courts of law in Khorramabad and in Larestan Shiraz therefore an official of the Iranian government apparatus.

According to Dr. Moradi's estimates, based on existing material from other researchers and his own count of cities/towns with Yaresan communities, the Yaresan population counts approximately 2.5 million in Iran. This number includes adherents of both 'traditionalist' Yaresan and the reformed branch, that is followers of Elahi. Those who follow the latter are centered around the cities of Tehran, Karaj and Hashtgerd while the 'traditionalist' Yaresan have their origin in the provincial areas of Kermanshah, including the area of Guran. It was, however, added that one also found 'traditionalist' Yaresan in Tehran, Karaj and Hashtgerd and about 25% or more of Yaresan living in these cities belong to the 'traditionalist' group. Due to its intellectual background, the reformed branch has been in a position to give the impression that it

outnumbers the 'traditionalist' Yaresan group in followers. However, in reality it makes up a smaller percentage of the Yaresan population on the whole.

#### Iranian authorities' perception of the Yaresan

According to Dr. Moradi, the Iranian authorities view the 'traditionalist' Yaresan as a non-Muslim group and do not recognize the minority as a religion. Outside of their homes and their holy places, the Yaresan present themselves as Muslims. In their interaction with Iranian authorities and government institutions, the Yaresan register themselves as Muslims, for example in connection with registration for official documents or in connection with education and application for jobs. The source said that the Yaresan would not stand a chance at getting an education or employment, should they choose to do otherwise and assert their identities as Yaresan. Such an individual would not have access to institutes of higher learning or positions in the public sector. However, most of the 2.5 mio. Yaresan in Iran live like many others do, i.e. keeping their Yari identity and belief within the four walls of their home and behaving like a Muslim outside the walls of the home, and accessing higher education or positions in the public sector would therefore not be an issue for them. According to the source, one of the main reasons why many Yaresanis seek refuge in foreign countries is that they do not want to continue lying about their identity and belief as Yaresan and they do not want their children to grow up in such conditions. If it somehow is uncovered that a person is a Yaresani by the authorities or others affiliated with the authorities, problems could arise and a person might be unable to continue his or her education or be dismissed from his or her job in the public sector.

Dr. Moradi further explained that the Yaresan were able to gather for their ceremonies ('*Jam*') on Fridays. The source added that an outsider could participate in these ceremonies if a local Yarsani knew him and came together with him. The outsider could not sit and participate in the ceremony, but only stand in the back and observe. It was added that these ceremonies would typically take place with the presence of a plainclothes person with ties to the authorities, and the local Yaresan would usually know such person. The ceremonies can, therefore, take place, however they are surveilled.

#### Missionary activities of the Yaresan

On the topic of whether the Yaresan conduct missionary activities, Dr. Moradi said that neither the 'reformist' nor the 'traditionalist' Yaresan make attempts at converting others or at encouraging others to follow them. However, Dr. Moradi considered that if an individual wanted to convert to Yari faith, none of the two main groups of Yarsan would refuse to accept the conversion and let the convert into their communities. The reason behind this is, according to Dr. Moradi, that there is no evidence in the Yari religious scriptures that conversion to Yari faith is prohibited or that Yaresan are only born into the faith. However, the Yaresan community do not propagate or encourage others to convert to Yari religion.

However, the source emphasized that conversion to Yaresan is a phenomenon that merely takes place outside of Iran where non-Yaresanis contact Yaresani religious leaders and request conversion. Dr. Moradi explained lack of conversion to Yari faith in Iran by saying that if it was uncovered by the authorities that a person had converted to Yari faith, he or she would likely face reprisals, including death sentence, from the authorities. For this obvious reason, individuals do not convert to Yari faith in Iran.

Both the 'traditionalist' and 'reformist' Yaresan have private ceremonies and it is the assessment of Dr. Moradi that outsiders would usually not be able to walk in and participate in ceremonies, unless they are on familiar terms with a Yaresani who would take to these ceremonies. Invited outsiders can stand in the background and watch the ceremony, however he or she would not be able to sit down and join the ceremony.

The concept of '*ser magoo*' does not, as has been claimed in some works, make reference to a secrecy that permeates the belief as a rule, but is rather the product of a historical adjustment to surrounding circumstances. Historically, the secrecy surrounding Yari faith and its traditions derived from a fear of repercussions from surrounding hostile communities.

Another historical reason why the notion of secrecy '*ser magoo*' came to characterize the Yari religion stems from interaction with Western anthropologists and religionists who wanted to study the Yari faith in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to the source, when antropologists and researchers asked the Yaresan religious leaders about Yari faith, these leaders answered that they could not inform the researchers about their religion as it was a secret knowledge which was not supposed to be revealed to outsiders. However, according to Dr. Moradi, the religious leaders did in fact not have much knowledge to relay about their religion and hid behind this concept of secrecy, according to the source. Even today, religious leaders of the Yaresan typically do not possess extensive knowledge about the religion, according to the source.

#### Awareness-raising activities in the Yaresan community

Concerning activities aimed at raising awareness of the situation of the Yaresan in Iran, Dr. Moradi said that the few that conduct activities aimed at highlighting the situation of the Yaresan do so in groups that on the surface do not resemble groups with a political agenda. There are examples of cases where individuals have carried out awareness-raising activities and as a consequence have been arrested and maltreated. Dr. Moradi mentioned two cases regarding women who had been arrested by the authorities for such reasons: a woman from Kermanshah was arrested last week (mid February 2017) and held in detention for two days and upon being released she committed suicide. Two years ago (2015), a female student had stood up at an event where President Rouhani was present and spoken up about the rights for the Yaresan minority. She was later taken into custody in Kermanshah where she came from and moved to custody in Tehran. Upon being sent back to Kermanshah, she was put under house arrest, and the security forces told her parents that she may be called to Tehran later on. . A few months later, when she was told to present herself to the authorities in Tehran within a week, she committed suicide. Dr. Moradi assumed that both women were subjected to mistreatment in detention, which he considered as the main reason behind their suicides.

Dr. Moradi said that if a person is suspected of being active in promoting rights for the Yaresan, he or she would risk being the object of harassment and persecution at the hands of the government. Dr. Moradi mentioned a dentist, who was a Yaresani whom the authorities harassed continuously because he was vocal on the situation of Yaresan in Iran.

The source added that the extent of activities aimed at raising awareness of the situation of the Yaresan in Iran is not that much when comparing with that of the Baha'i community for example. It was the assessment of Dr. Moradi, that generally, the Yaresan in Iran does not have many active members who conduct activities aimed at raising awareness of the minority's situation, both religiously and politically. He

considered the number of politically active Yaresanis in Iran did not exceed one hundred individuals. The Yaresan have a tendency to hide their religion when interacting with the Iranian authorities to avoid harassment and difficulties with the authorities, while there are more examples of Baha'is standing fast on their conviction and Baha'i identity when confronted by the authorities.

#### Yaresan targeted by the Iranian authorities

Dr. Moradi has noticed that the younger generation of the Yarsan community in Iran has begun to show an interest in learning more about Yari faith. Specifically, he has through contacts in Iran, heard of an increase in the interest for written materials about the 'traditionalist' version of Yari faith. Dr. Moradi said that these sorts of texts would be considered illegal in Iran, while the works of Elahi and his followers are not illegal and they have been reprinted several times.

Dr. Moradi explained that Yarsanis who are considered of interest by the authorities and that could risk being targeted are those who publicly and actively assert their Yari identity and religion. He further said that although the Yarsan, according to their faith, are not allowed to lie about their faith and their identity as Yarsan, the vast majority of almost 2.5 million of the Yarsan are forced to do so, or face problems with the authorities. If an individual is active, religiously or politically or both, and for example is caught in possession of materials considered illicit, he or she could face arrest and interrogation by the authorities. Typically, he or she would be consequently ordered to discontinue any such activities or face prison. The source added that sites considered holy to the Yarsan have been subject to vandalism in Kermanshah at the hands of the authorities.

Dr. Moradi found that although followers of the Elahi branch have attempted to associate with Shiism, the group has not been entirely free from harassment and maltreatment at the hands of the authorities. Followers of this branch of Yari faith are treated much the same way as followers of certain Sufi brotherhoods, for example Gonabadi Sufi order that from time to time is the object of crackdowns, for example through the authorities' harassment and arrest of its leaders.

#### Conversion to Christianity among Yaresan

Dr. Moradi had never heard of Christian missionaries being active in Yaresan-populated areas of Iran.

Dr. Moradi found that according to the Yaresan religion, there generally are no written rules that prohibit conversion to other religions. However, Dr. Moradi considered that conversion to another religion would not be welcomed among the Yaresan.

## Appendix C: Terms of Reference

1. Iranian authorities' perception of Yari belief as a religion or as a version of Shia Islam.
2. Missionary activities
  - 2.1. Prevalence of missionary activities, including types of missionary activities, target groups, places etc.
3. Activities aiming at raising awareness about the human rights situation of Yarsan in Iran
  - 3.1. Prevalence of awareness-raising activities, including types of activities, target groups, places etc.
4. Yarsan targeted by the Iranian authorities
5. Types and intensity of activities conducted by Yarsan which cause arrest or harassment by the authorities, and profile of those being harassed/arrested.
6. Conversion to Christianity
  - 6.1. Prevalence of conversion to Christianity and possible consequences thereof.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Religious Minorities in Kurdistan: Beyond the Mainstream*, ed. Omarkhali, K. (2014), p. 3
- <sup>2</sup> Yari followers are also found in Iraq, where they call themselves Kaka'i. Omarkhali, *Religious Minorities in Kurdistan: Beyond the Mainstream* (2014)
- <sup>3</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Religious Minorities in Kurdistan: Beyond the Mainstream*, ed. Omarkhali, K. (2014), p. 3
- <sup>4</sup> There seem to be differences within the group as to which appellation is most appropriate for several reasons, both historical and religious.
- <sup>5</sup> Omarkhali, *Religious Minorities in Kurdistan: Beyond the Mainstream* (2014), p. XXII
- <sup>6</sup> Dr. Golmorad Moradi applies the term 'reformed' branch, instead of 'modernist', while others refer to this group as those who follow Nur Ali Elahi, for example Mehrdad R. Izady. Hajj Ne'matollah Jayhunabadi, father of Nur Ali Elahi, is in literature on the subject described as a 'reformist' of the Yaresan tradition, see for example Omarkhali(ed.), *Religious Minorities in Kurdistan: Beyond the Mainstream* (2014) including chapter by Mojan Membrado on '*Hajj Ne'matollah Jayhunabadi (1871-1920) and His Mystical Path within the Ahl-e Haqq Order*'.
- <sup>7</sup> Mir-Hosseini, (1994), p. 212
- <sup>8</sup> Mir-Hosseini, (1994), p. 212
- <sup>9</sup> Izady, (1992), p. 145-146
- <sup>10</sup> Izady, (1992), p. 145
- <sup>11</sup> Izady, (1992), p. 146
- <sup>12</sup> Mir-Hosseini, Ziba, *Redefining the Truth: The Ahl-i Haqq and the Islamic Republic of Iran*, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (1994), p. 216
- <sup>13</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Religious Minorities in Kurdistan: Beyond the Mainstream*, ed. Omarkhali, K. (2014), p. 4
- <sup>14</sup> Kreyenbroek, *Religious Minorities in Kurdistan: Beyond the Mainstream*, ed. Omarkhali, K. (2014), p. 4. Mehrdad R. Izady estimated in his book in 1992, that approximately 10-15% of the Kurdish population are Yaresan (Izady, 1992). Ziba Mir-Hosseini states in her article from 1994, that "*There is no accurate information on the number of adherents, given that followers tend not to declare their affiliation to outsiders. The followers claim that they are as many as 20 million world-wide, of whom 5 million live in Iran. This is certainly an exaggeration.*" (Mir Hosseini, (1994), p. 211)
- <sup>15</sup> Mir-Hosseini, (1994), p. 216 "The Ahl-i Haqq of Sahneh district are not only fewer but less isolated and more prosperous; here Ahl-i Haqq communities have a peasant composition and do not include any tribes of the region."
- <sup>16</sup> Mir-Hosseini, (1994), p.216
- <sup>17</sup> Mir Hosseini, (1994), p. 217
- <sup>18</sup> According to Ziba Mir Hosseini, in the Iranian Encyclopedia of Shi'ism, the Ahl-i Haqq who are followers of Elahi, are referred to as 'Muslim Ahl-i Haqq' ('Ahl-i Haqq-i musalman') while the rest are referred to as 'Devil-Worshippers' ('shaytan-parastan'). (Ziba Mir Hosseini, *Redefining the Truth: Ahl-i Haqq and the Islamic Republic of Iran*, (1994), p. 215)
- <sup>19</sup> The source referred to the article <http://www.rudaw.net/english/opinion/30062013>
- <sup>20</sup> A music instrument played by Yaresan during their religious ceremonies.
- <sup>21</sup> The jam is a sacred gathering of the Yaresan and comprises a main ritual which takes place on Fridays. During the ceremonies, a Sayyed must be present as well as at least seven male members of the community who sit in a circle. Among other things, sacred litany (kalam) are sung, the tanbour is played, and there is a ritual consumption of food and drink. For more detailed description of the ceremony, see Kreyenbroek, *Religious Minorities in Kurdistan: Beyond the Mainstream*, ed. Omarkhali, K. (2014), p. 9
- <sup>22</sup> See also Kreyenbroek, *Religious Minorities in Kurdistan: Beyond the Mainstream*, ed. Omarkhali, K. (2014), p. 5: *Jayhunabadi's successors have had increasing numbers of followers on non-Yarsan origin, both in Iran and the West.*
- <sup>23</sup> According to Ziba Mir Hosseini, in the Iranian Encyclopedia of Shi'ism, the Ahl-i Haqq who are followers of Elahi, are referred to as Muslim Ahl-i Haqq (Ahl-i Haqq-i musalman) while the rest are referred to as Devil-Worshippers (shaytan-parastan). (Ziba Mir Hosseini, *Redefining the Truth: Ahl-i Haqq and the Islamic Republic of Iran*, p. 215, 1994
- <sup>24</sup> A music instrument played by Yaresan during their religious ceremonies.