What is **Nowruz** and why is it celebrated?

Nowruz, which translates into “new day” in Farsi, originated in ancient Persia, more than 3,000 years ago. **It marks the traditional Iranian New Year, which begins on the vernal equinox and celebrates the arrival of spring**. It is a 13-day celebration that, this year, starts on March 20, 2023 at 2:24 p.m.

Nowruz is the Iranian or Persian New Year celebrated by various ethnicities worldwide. It is a festival based on the Iranian Solar Hijri calendar, on the spring equinox—on or around 21 March on the Gregorian calendar.



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In every home, the *haftseen* table is decorated with seven items – since seven is considered a lucky number. Each item begins with the letter *sin* (s) in Persian, and each item is a symbol of spring and renewal, including:

1. *Seeb* (apple), representing beauty
2. *Seer* (garlic), representing good health
3. *Serkeh* (vinegar), representing patience
4. *Sonbol* (hyacinth), representing spring
5. *Samanu* (sweet pudding), representing fertility
6. *Sabzeh* (sprouts), representing rebirth
7. *Sekeh* (coins), representing prosperity

Other words beginning with the letter "s" can also be used, such as the spice sumac, its brilliant gold color representing the sunrise, or *senjed*, a dried fruit of the Lotus tree, representing love.



Some families even add a little more flair. *Haftseen* tables can also include a Quran, a book of poetry, a mirror and candles (reflecting into the future), a goldfish swimming in a bowl (representing life), painted eggs (representing fertility), and all kinds of sweets and fruits.



THE STORY OF NOWRUZ, THE PERSIAN NEW YEAR BY CALIFORNIA HUMANITIES BOARD MEMBER SHIVA FARIVAR

California Humanities Board Member Shiva Farivar shares the classic traditions of Nowruz, the Persian New Year, which just took place on March 20, 2021.

The onset of Spring is celebrated by Iranians, or Persians, around the world as the beginning of a New Year. Nowruz, pronounced NoRooz, literally means “New Day,” and it occurs on the day of the vernal equinox, specifically on the exact time when the Sun crosses the celestial equator and equalizes night and day. It must be calculated every year, and this year, it happened on March 20, 02:37:28 AM, PST.

The Holiday has Iranian and Zoroastrian origins, but it is also celebrated in other countries, such as Afghanistan, Georgia, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and other Central Asian and Balkan

countries. The United Nations officially recognized the International Day of Nowruz with the adoption of the UN Resolution 1364/253 in 2010.

In Iran, Nowruz Holidays last thirteen days. In days before the date, every household performs deep house cleaning, and families purchase new clothes to be worn on the first day of the New Year. On the eve of the last Wednesday before Nowruz, “Chaharshanbe Suri,” a tradition of jumping over bonfires and lighting off firecrackers and fireworks, takes place. The fire symbolically takes away ill-health and problems and replaces them with warmth, health, and energy. A poetic line accompanies these activities:

“My yellow is yours; your red is mine!”

When the time of the change is about to take place, families gather around a table and await the exact moment of the March equinox. The table is called “Haftseen.” It is decorated with seven items that begin with the Persian letter “Sin”:

Sabze – wheat, barley, or lentil sprouts, grown in a dish
Samanu – sweet wheat ‘pudding’
Senjed – a special kind of berry
Serke – vinegar
Seeb – apple
Seer – garlic
Sumagh – special Persian spice



The table is also decorated with a mirror to symbolize ‘reflection,’ candles for symbolizing ‘fire,’ painted eggs for ‘fertility,’ goldfish for ‘life,’ coins for ‘wealth,’ hyacinths, tulips, and a “book of wisdom.”

When the New Year takes place, families hug and kiss each other and wish each other a happy new year by saying:

No-Rooz Mobarak (Happy New Year)
Eid-e Shoma Mobarak (Happy New Year to you)
NoRooz Pirooz (Wishing you a Prosperous New Year)

Families then pay visits to each other, with the younger ones paying their respects to the older members first, who then return the gesture by visiting them back. The Holidays end on the thirteenth day when families gather for a picnic to celebrate nature and the new season. Nowruz is a celebration of Renewal and Rebirth, bidding farewell to the passing year and making wishes for the coming year.

“Nowruz” by Jalaluddin Rumi

“In my heart, you are the one mirthful ray
You are the caring, though my companion they
Happy is the world with the Nowruz and the Eid
You are both my Eid and my Nowruz today.”

What is Nowruz? The Persian New Year explained

More than 300 million people celebrate Nowruz every year.



Nowruz is a springtime celebration whose activities symbolise rebirth and the link between humans and nature (AFP)

By Scheherezade Faramarzi

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Nowruz is the national New Year festivity celebrated in Iran, Afghanistan, and the Kurdish regions of Iraq, Turkey and Syria, and throughout Central Asia.

With roots going back to at least 3,000 years, Nowruz is one of the oldest festivals that is still marked by humans.

The event is a springtime celebration whose activities symbolise rebirth and the link between humans and nature. The Iranian poet Saadi (1210-1291) wrote: “Awaken, the morning Nowruz breeze is showering the garden with flowers.”

While the two-week celebrations center on seeing relatives, picnicking, travelling, and eating traditional food, Nowruz itself - which is Farsi for New Day - is steeped in ancient myths and fiction, as well as traditions and symbols.

When is Nowruz?

It begins at the spring equinox - the moment when the sun crosses the equator and day and night are of equal length.

Usually, this is between 19-21 March, depending on astronomical calculations. This year, it is due to begin on 20 March a little after 7am Tehran local time.



Nowruz is the national New Year festivity celebrated in Iran, Afghanistan, and the Kurdish regions of Iraq, Turkey and Syria, and throughout Central Asia (AFP)

Who celebrates Nowruz?

It is part of Zoroastrianism, a Persian religion that predates Christianity and Islam to the first millennium BC. It is both monotheistic - Ahuramazda, the supreme deity, is the creator of all things good - and dualistic in its teachings. In Zoroastrianism, fire and water are considered symbols of purity.

It was founded by Zoroaster (also known as Zarathustra), whose religious teachings are the foundation for Zoroastrianism.

His collections of writings are known as the *Avesta*.

When was Nowruz first celebrated?

Described by 11th-century Persian astronomer and poet Omar Khayyam as “the renewal of the world”, Nowruz dates back thousands of years.

It is not known exactly how far back Nowruz goes, but current estimates are that it is at least 3,000 years old, when the Persian empire extended beyond the borders of modern Iran. It is not mentioned in the *Avesta*.



Nowruz is steeped in ancient myths, tradition and symbols of nature (AFP)

Over the centuries, this age-old rite has developed and expanded. Gradually, the celebrations accumulated more social, religious and cultural influences as they spread along established trade routes and among an estimated 300 million people.

It has survived centuries of conquests, from the seventh- and eighth-century Arab forces which invaded the Persian world to governments in the former Soviet republics in Central Asia; from the Taliban in Afghanistan to secular authorities in Turkey, Syria and Iraq, which have tried to curtail Kurdish cultural identity.

How do you prepare for Nowruz?

While specific traditions vary from country to country, as different cultures add their own elements, the central theme is the same: a celebration of spring and a time for rebirth and renewal.

In Afghanistan, for example, the main event is *Guli Surkh*, or the Red Flower Festival in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, where the *buzkashi* tournaments, a national sport similar to polo, are held during the first 40 days of the year. A goat carcass is used instead of a ball.



Goldfish in a bowl, representing life, as well as green sprouts are traditionally displayed in an Iranian home celebrating Nowruz (AFP)

A commonality across the Central Asian countries is the 24-hour preparation of *sumalak*, a thick pudding made from wheatgrass, as women sing folk songs while stirring huge pots. Open-air festivals showcase nomadic traditions and sports, such as horse racing, wrestling, and archery.

Preparations for Nowruz celebrations in Iran begin weeks before the start of spring, including house-cleaning (*khaneh takani*). Families also grow *sabzeh* (wheat, barley, mung bean or lentils) in a dish.

When the greens sprout after a couple of weeks, the dish is placed on the *Haft-seen* table, which is the focus of Nowruz observance. It is joined by six other symbolic items which start with the Persian letter "seen" or S. That makes seven, a sacred number in Zoroastrianism. They include:

- seeb (apples) - symbol of health and beauty
- senjed (dried oleaster berries) - wisdom and rebirth
- samanu (wheat pudding) - strength/justice
- somaq (sumac) – patience
- serkeh (vinegar) - age/patience
- seer (garlic) - cleansing of body and environment

The *Haft-seen* spread also includes other items such as a mirror, symbolising reflection; coloured eggs, for fertility; and goldfish in a bowl, which represent life.

There is usually also a book by the Persian poet Hafez (1315-1390), or the Quran. They reflect Nowruz's power to blend its ancient roots with more recent religious and cultural traditions.

How is Nowruz celebrated?

The arrival of Nowruz is announced by street singers, known as *Haji Firooz*, who wear colourful outfits and play the tambourine.

The performers blacken their faces with shoe polish or a mixture of soot and fat. Years ago, charcoal was commonly used. They represent a fictional character in Iranian folklore whose roots are ambiguous.



Nowruz blends its ancient roots with more recent religious and cultural traditions (AFP)

Some versions of the traditional story trace him to a character watching over the eternal flame of the ancient Zoroastrians; another is that Haji Firooz was actually a black slave who entertained during the New Year in the Sassanid period (224 to 651 AD). Yet the more plausible theory is that he was one of the estimated two million black slaves who were brought to Iran from Africa as part of the 19th century Indian Ocean slave trade.

The last Tuesday evening before Nowruz (17 March this year) is the celebration of *Chaharshanbeh Soori*, the symbolic burning of all that was negative from the previous year while looking forward to a new beginning.



Chaharshanbeh Soori symbolises burning away negativity from the previous year (AFP)

Related customs include jumping over bonfires in the streets while chanting: “Give me your red colour, take my yellow colour.” This symbolises how the fire takes away the yellow of sickness and gives back the red of health and warmth.

In recent years, firecrackers have become more frequent, much to the annoyance of some participants. There is also *qashoq zani,* which involves children banging spoons on cooking pots and knocking on neighbours’ doors to receive sweets.

What food do people eat for Nowruz?

On the first day of Nowruz, families gather at the home of their oldest family member.

The traditional New Year meal includes *sabzi polo mahi* (rice mixed with herbs and served with white fish); *ash reshteh* (a thick green soup with noodles, chickpeas and beans); and *kuku sabzi* (vegetable frittata).

Pastries include *baghlava*, *toot* (mulberry); *naan-nokhodchi* (chickpea cookies with pistachio); and *ajeel* (dried berries and raisins).

How long does Nowruz last?

The festivities end 13 days after the New Year with *Sizdeh Bedar*, which can be translated as either “getting rid of 13” (a symbol of bad luck), or “to hit the road”.



The two-week Nowruz celebrations center on meeting relatives, picnicking, travelling, and traditional food (AFP)

On *Sizdeh Bedar*, people head for open fields, plains, parks and riversides to picnic, taking with them the *sabzeh* they had meticulously grown. There, they throw the *sabzeh* into the river or the fields, to symbolise giving back to nature.

Schools and offices usually re-open the following day.



Nowruz has become a symbol of resistance that is reflected in a common greeting “Nowruz pirooz”, which means, “Nowruz victorious" (AFP)

What's the Iranian government view of Nowruz celebrations?

After the 1979 overthrow of 2,500 years of monarchy, the Islamic Republic of Iran, which had initially tried to equate the celebratory rituals with paganism, failed to stamp out the festivities that are deeply embedded in Iranian culture.

Thus in Iran, Nowruz has become a symbol of resistance that is reflected in the common greeting *Nowruz pirooz*, which means “Nowruz victorious”, or more commonly, *Eid shoma mubarak*.

How has Nowruz been affected by coronavirus?



Iranian's take health precautions this year in preparing for Norooz, as advised by the government (AFP)

The outbreak of COVID-19 has hit Iran hard. At the time of writing, the official death toll has surpassed 1000 with more than 17000 infections diagnosed, although many observers believe these to be an underestimate. As a result, authorities in Iran are urging people to stay home and have restricted travel between cities to halt the spread of the virus.

Traffic has been banned on many of the country’s roads, especially in tourist provinces popular during the 13-day festivities. Domestic and international flights are at a near-standstill.

Iran's spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has cancelled his annual Nowruz address, which was due to take place at the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad, on 20 March.

How do we know about Nowruz?

In his book *Cyropaedia*, the Greek historian Xenophon (431-354 BC) mentions the celebration that took place in Persepolis - Persepolis in Persian is *Takht-e Jamshid*, or the "Throne of Jamshid".

According to Persian legend, Jamshid possessed divine glory and was commanded by the supreme Zoroastrian deity Ahuramazda - who represented light and fire, truth, goodness and wisdom - to fight Ahriman. Ahriman was his twin brother, the god of darkness, anger and death, who had caused drought, famine and the destruction of good and abundance.



Different cultures add their own traditions in celebrating Nowruz, but the central theme is the same: a celebration of spring and a time for rebirth and renewal (AFP)

After defeating Ahriman, every dry tree blossomed and Jamshid once more brought prosperity to his people, hence the present-day tradition of giving back the *sabzeh* to nature.

Related narratives are mainly traced from the epic *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings), by the 11th-century poet Ferdowsi, which credits the mythical King Jamshid for establishing Nowruz after he saved humans from a harsh winter that was destined to freeze the planet.

"He constructed a throne studded with gems, and had demons raise him aloft from the earth into the heavens; there he sat on his throne like the sun shining in the sky. The world's creatures gathered in

wonder about him and scattered jewels on him, and called this day the New Day, or Nowruz," Ferdowsi notes in *Shahnameh*.

