



NOWRUZ II. IN THE ISLAMIC PERIOD

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Introduction. The Islamic conquest altered many Iranian traditions specifically associated with national ideology, imperial institutions, and Zoroastrian rituals. Although Nowruz was an established symbol of these three aspects, it did survive while less significant festivals were eclipsed by their Islamic rivals and gradually became abandoned by indifferent Mongol and Turkish rulers or hostile clerical authorities during [Safavid](#) and Qajar periods. Nowruz survived because it was so profoundly engrained in Iranian traditions, history, and cultural memory that [Iranian identity](#) and Nowruz mutually buttressed each other, and the emergence of a distinctly Persian Muslim society—and later the emergence of a nation state with the advent of the Safavids—legitimized the ancient national festival and allowed it to flourish with slight modifications or elaborations. Indeed, as will be set out in subsequent sections, the incremental expansion of Nowruz ceremonies from the Safavids, through the Qajars, to the Pahlavi period enabled the court to parade its power and strengthened its attempts at forming a stronger central authority. Besides, it explains the establishment of increasingly sophisticated and protocol-ridden royal audiences with all the pomp and ceremony they could muster. Like all rituals, therefore, it both manifested a belief or ideology and reinforced it through an



annual recital. It was precisely because Nowruz was associated from the outset with cultural memories of the splendor and divinely bestowed power of the royal courts of pre-Islamic Persia that it was attractive to rulers, from the Abbasid caliphs to the Pahlavis. Along with its many ceremonies, and most notably that of gift exchange, it provided the rulers with an alternative source of affirming and enhancing their power and prestige through a strictly non-Islamic channel; for unlike religious festivals, they could appear and be celebrated as the focal point and the peerless heroes of the occasion.

While most of the traditions now associated with Nowruz have been inherited from the past usages, no comprehensive history of Nowruz in the Islamic period has been written. Such an account must be pieced together from occasional notices in general and local histories, brief records by geographers, and scattered references in works of poets and storytellers. Only for recent times do we have detailed information in the form of eyewitness reports by travelers and, more importantly, studies of contemporary practices throughout Persia and countries affected by Persian culture. But even these are problematic, as the former category mainly describes court usages and the latter usually gives uncritical narratives embellished with rhetorical and, frequently, fanciful interpretations.

History up to the Safavid period. The Arabs captured the capital of the Sasanian Empire on a Nowruz day, taking the celebrating inhabitants by surprise (Ya'qubi, I, p. 198). Henceforth, the early Arab governors forcefully levied heavy Nowruz and Mehragān taxes on the conquered people (Jahšīāri, pp. 15, 24; Şuli, p. 219). The Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs retained this onerous burden of taxation on their conquered subjects, but, at the same time, they also celebrated both Nowruz and Mehragān with considerable relish and pomp, thereby helping to keep alive Nowruz and its many traditions (Mas'udi, *Moruj* VII, p. 277; Tanuķi, pp. 145-46; Ahsan, pp. 287-88).

Later, other Islamic dynasties of Persia did the same (for the Taherids, see Jāḥeẓ, p. 150; for the Samanids, see Biruni, tr. Sachau, p. 217), and the court poets praised the occasion and offered their congratulatory panegyrics. Yāqut reports (*Boldān*, Cairo, VI, p. 258; cf. Moqaddasi, p. 431) that the Buyid (see [BUYIDS](#)) ruler 'Azod-al-Dawla (r. 949-83) customarily welcomed Nowruz in a majestic hall, wherein servants had placed gold and silver plates and vases full of fruit and colorful flowers. He sat on a costly seat (*masnad*), and the court astronomer came forward, kissed the ground, and congratulated him on the arrival of the New Year. Then the king summoned the musicians and singers



and invited his boon companions. They entered and filed in to their assigned places, and all enjoyed a great festive occasion. Beyhaqi describes the lavish celebration of Nowruz at the Ghaznavid (see [GHAZNAVIDS](#)) court (Beyhaqi, ed. Fayyāz, pp. 9, 12, 704, 751, 815), and some of the most beautiful descriptive opening passages of Persian courtly panegyrics (especially by [Farroki](#), Manučehri, and [Mas'ud-e Sa'd-e Salmān](#)) are in praise of Nowruz. Their simple yet melodious rhythms suggest that they may have been accompanied by music. The melodies known as the “*Nowruzi*” airs, apparently inherited from the Sasanian period, included the Great Nowruz (*Nowruz-e bozorg*), Nowruz-e Kay Qobād, the Lesser Nowruz (*nowruz-e kordak* or *kārā*), the Edessan Nowruz (*Nowruz-e rahāwi*, comprising the Arabian and Persian melodies), and Nowruz-e Šabā (Dehḡodā, s.v. “Nowruz”; Borumand-e Sa'id, pp. 302-8). In the 14th century, [Hāfez](#) says that “the melody of the Nowruz breeze (*bād-e nowruzi*) rekindles the inner light, and the melody of the “Throne of victory” (*taḡt-e piruzi*) inspires the song of the nightingale intoxicated by flowers.”

The Nowruz festivities were by no means restricted to the royal courts. It was “a solemn feast through all of Persia, ... observed not only in the great cities, but celebrated with extraordinary rejoicings in every little town, village, and hamlet” (Lane, 1848, II, p. 462; see also Biḡami, I, p. 150; Farāmarz b. Ḳodādād, I, p. 49; for testimonies of poets see Borumand-e Sa'id, pp. 253-384). In Shiraz, Muslims and Zoroastrians celebrated Nowruz together and decorated the bazaars (Moḡaddasi, p. 429). Biruni testifies that many ancient Nowruz rites were still observed in his time. People grow, he says, “seven kinds of grains on seven columns and from their growth they draw inferences as regards the crop of the year whether it would be good or bad” (Biruni, *Chronology*, tr. Sachau, p. 217). They held the first day of Nowruz as particularly auspicious, and the dawn the most auspicious hour (Idem, p. 217). Good omens appearing before Nowruz included fires and light glowing on the western bank of the Tigris opposite Kalwādā, and on the Denā (text: *dmā*) mountain in Fārs. Tasting honey thrice in the morning of Nowruz and lighting three candles before speaking were thought to ward off diseases (Idem, p. 216). People exchanged presents (notably sugar), kindled fire (to consume all corruptions), bathed in the streams (Idem, p. 218), and sprinkled water on each other.

Ebn Faqih (p. 165) specifies that “this ancient custom is still observed in Hamadan, Isfahan, Dināvar, and the surrounding regions,” and the *Tarjoma-ye Tafsiḡ-e Ṭabari* (I, p. 148, n. 1) adds that in so doing people said: “May you live long! (*zenda bāšiā! zenda bāšiā!*).” We may add that to this day traditional



households sprinkle rose water on relatives and guests. According to Kuşyār (*apud* Taqizāda, p. 191), the sixth day of Nowruz was called “Water-pouring [day]” (*ṣabb al-mā*) and was revered as the Great Nowruz and “the Day of Hope,” because it commemorated the completion of the act of creation. Ġazālī (I, p. 522) strongly disapproved of Muslims celebrating Nowruz by decorating the bazaars, preparing sweets, and making or selling children’s toys, wooden shields, sword, trumpets, and so on.”

In 897, the Abbasid caliph al-Moʿtazd (r. 892-902) forbade the people of Baghdad “to kindle bonfire on New Year’s Eve and pour water [on passersby] on New Year’s Day,” but fearing riot he rescinded the order (Ṭabari, III, p. 2163). The Fatimid caliphs also repeatedly forbade the kindling of fire and sprinkling of water at Nowruz (Maqrizi, p. 394). Ṣābi described the rules issued against Nowruz celebration in the fourth century Baghdad as follows: “A Muslim was forbidden to dress like a *demmi* [that is, people of the book, namely Jews, Christians, and Ṣābians, and by extension Zoroastrians], ... to give an apple to someone on Nawrüz to honor the day, to color eggs at their feast,” and, in general, “sharing in jollifications on that occasion was condemned.” Some non-Muslims “hired a special cook to work during the night to have the dishes fresh in the morning, gave parties for relatives and friends, at which they served green melons, plums, peaches, and dates if they were in season.” Women bought special Nowruz perfumes, and “eggs were dyed in various colors. To sprinkle perfume on a man ... and tread seven times on him was a means of driving away the evil eye, laziness and fever. Antimony and rue were used to improve the sight during the coming year. Colleges were shut and the students played. ... Muslims drank wine in public and ate cleaned lentils like the *demmis* and joined them in throwing water on folks.” Respectable peoples threw water on each other in their houses or gardens; the commoners did this on the street (*Ketāb al-Hafawāt*, tr. Tritton, pp. 144-45).

A detailed account of Nowruz celebration in the 10th-century Isfahan is given by Ebn Ḥawqal (p. 364): “During the Nowruz festival, people gather for seven days in the bazaar of Karina, a suburb of Isfahan, engaged in merriment; they enjoy various food and go around visiting decorated shops. The inhabitants and those coming from other places to participate in this festival, spend a good deal of money, wear beautiful clothes, and take part in gatherings for plays and merrymaking. Skillful singers, both male and female, take their places side by side on the riverside along the palaces. The whole atmosphere is filled with joy and happiness. Many assemble on rooftops and in the markets,



engage in festivities, drinking, eating, and consuming sweets, not letting an idle moment to pass by. ... No one disturbs them, for their rulers have allowed this festival, and it is a well-established tradition. It is said that besides the abundance of fruits, drinks, and food brought in and sold for a meager price, the expenses of the night of the spring equinox amount to 200,000 dirhams. As for the prices, 2,000-dirham weight of finest grapes costs a mere five dirhams” (see also the eyewitness description by Māfarroḳi [tr., pp. 17-18] and the testimony of Nasafi, p. 168).

A particular custom was the enthroning of the “Nowruzian ruler” (*mir-e Nowruzi*, somewhat similar to the lord of misrule in Medieval Western literature and folklore). A commoner was elected as “king” and provided with regalia (often mockingly old and unseemly), a throne, court officials, and a number of troops, and he ruled for a few days and was fully obeyed. Then he was dethroned, beaten, and forced to flee (Qazvini, 1944; Idem, 1945). In some regions, particularly in Kurdistan, this ancient tradition is still practiced (Wilson, p. 245; Keyvān, p. 119; Bois, p. 477; Mostowfi, I, pp. 351-53).

Religious views on Nowruz. Opposition to ancient Iranian observances was natural in a strictly Muslim society, and a few attempts at restricting Nowruz rites have already been noted. Some claimed that the Prophet had told those who celebrated Nowruz and Mehragān that God had given them two superior feasts, namely, al-Feṭr (end of fasting month) and al-Naḥr (the Feast of Sacrifice; al-Ālusi, p. 336). Others asserted that ‘Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb (d. 661) had said “for me a feast day is that on which I do not sin” (Ġazāli, II, p. 566). Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow (cited by Honari, p. 194) expressed “shame” (*ār*) when hearing about the auspiciousness of Nowruz: “although throughout the world Nowruz is dear and pleasant to the ignorant (*gar ċe be jahān ‘aziz-ast o ḳoš zi nādān*), to me it verily appears as unsavory and demeaning (*nāḳoš o kvār*).” Abu Ḥāmed Moḥammad Ġazāli (1058-1111) declared that all festive acts must be abandoned and one should fast on such days and not even mention the name of Nowruz and Sada so that these “Zoroastrian observances” become “degraded and turned into perfectly ordinary days and no name or trace of them shall remain” (Ġazāli, I, p. 522). In contrast, many legitimized Nowruz as an Islamic Iranian feast. A tradition attributed to the Prophet (*hadith*) describes him accepting a bowl of sweets as the Nowruz gift and blessing the day as the occasion of renovation of life with its special custom of sprinkling water on each other as the symbol of divine rainfall (Biruni, p. 215). Another report claims that ‘Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb received Nowruz gifts from a Persian



landlord (*dehqānān*) and said: “May every day of ours be a Nowruz!” (Pseudo-Jāhez, pp. 237-38).

Scholars wrote in Persian and Arabic on the history of Nowruz, its rites, auspiciousness, and the various properties of its days; others collected poetry composed in its honor or words rhyming with Nowruz. The accounts by Musā b. ‘Isā Kasravi, Jāhez, Pseudo-Jāhez, Biruni, and Pseudo-Ḳayyām still constitute our main source on Nowruz. Several short treatises on the characteristics of Nowruz or literary, religious, and astrological comments on it are also extant (ed. Hārūn V, pp. 17-48), but many others referred to in the sources (for a list see Ṣayyād, pp. 81-3) have not survived. Several calendar reforms were effected in by the Abbasids and the Buyids before the Saljuq sultan Jalāl-al-Dawla Malekšāh (r. 465-85/1073-1092) established in 471/1079 the Julian-style solar year that fixes the beginning of the calendar year (Nowruz) at the vernal equinox (Taqizāda, pp. 156-80; see [CALENDARS ii. ISLAMIC PERIOD](#)).

A widely reported *hadith* (Majlesi, *Beḥār* LIX, pp. 143-91; Mollā Fayz *apud* Mo‘in, 1947, pp. 73-84) transmitted by Mo‘allā b. Ḳanis, a Persian disciple of the sixth Shi‘ite Imam Ja‘far-e Ṣādeq (d. 765), gives Nowruz a very strong Islamic significance and recounts for each of the “thirty days of each month” qualities which are directly parallel to those given in the Pahlavi treatise of *Māh farvardīn rüč xordād* (Markwart, pp. 742-55) even with regard to the names of the patron deities of those days (cf. Mo‘in, pp. 73-84; Monzavi, pp. 34-37; Shahbazi, pp. 255-56). Ja‘far-e Ṣādeq said that Nowruz was a most blessed day because it was on that day when God made the Sun rise, the wind blow, and the earth flourish; the occasion when He made a covenant with the pre-existing souls of mankind to worship none but Him, brought Noah’s ark ashore safely, and the day when He will resurrect the dead by ordering the living to pour water on them (hence the auspiciousness of sprinkling water on each other at Nowruz). It was on that day that God sent Gabriel with His message to Moḥammad, that the Prophet shattered the idols of Mecca and nominated ‘Ali at the *Ġadir-e ḳomm* as his legatee (on the date see Taqizāda, p. 154, n. 310), as well as the day when ‘Ali defeated the heretics at Nahravān, and when the Mahdi, the Lord of Time, will appear. Indeed, “no Nowruz comes unless we expect salvation from grief, for this day is an attribute of ours and our Shi‘ites.” After the publication of such works, the faithful were assigned the task of greeting Nowruz with elaborate prayers which include several *suras* of the Qor’ān (Nabā’i).

Later History. The festive celebration of Nowruz during the Safavid period is



well attested (see bibliography). In preparation to it, commanders, ministers, favored officials, rich merchants, and guild leaders were given pieces of land in the vast park of Bāg-e Naqš-e Jahān of Isfahan to decorate and illuminate. Each group set up tents with canopies of silk and brocade, and erected booths variously embellished; servants offered drinks and sweets to large crowds for several days. In the royal palace, a large table cloth (*sofra*) was spread on the floor of the Hall of Mirrors (*tālār-e āīna*), and on it were placed large bowls of water and plates of various fruits, greeneries, sweets, and colored eggs. According to Chardin (II, p. 267), in keeping with an ancient Iranian tradition, on the eve of Nowruz people send each other colored eggs as gifts. The shah gave some five hundred of them to his womenfolk. The eggs are encased in gold and decorated with four miniature paintings. The shah sat at the head of the *sofra*, amongst the royal women he favored most, who were all bedecked in jewelry. They engaged in pleasant conversation, and then, at the shah's command, female dancers, musicians, and singers entered and entertained the audience. In another chamber the court astronomer was trying to determine the exact moment of "the turn of the year" (*taḥwil-e sāl*, that is, when the Sun entered the sign of Aries at the vernal equinox). As soon as he gave the sign that the New Year had arrived, pages sent off firecrackers into the sky, and, seeing this, the household female servants let out cries of exultation thereby announcing the good news to the king and his companion. At the same time, the news was made public by some palace guards firing off their muskets and citadel guards their cannons, whereupon an official band occupying the center of the great town square (Meydān-e naqš-e jahān) beat on their drums and kettledrums and blew into their wind instruments (*sornāy*). Shouts of joy filled the air; eunuchs opened special bags of wild rue (*esfand*) and sprinkled seeds into the fire, causing the air to be pleasantly scented. The shah, as all other Iranians, gazed at a bowl of water the moment the year "turned," believing that "water is the symbol of prosperity" (*āb rowšanā'i-st*, lit. 'water is light') and if one looks at it at the turn of the year he would enjoy happiness all year long. A few prayers (usually Qur'anic verses, extensively cited by Majlesi, II) were recited, and everyone wearing new clothes drank some water or rosewater, congratulated elders, kinsfolk and friends, and partook of sweets. Elders presented gifts to the members of household, relatives, servants, and friends, and distributed alms to the poor, dervishes, and local *sayyeds* (descendants of the Imams). In the palace, the shah held a great banquet with wine and music for military commanders, senior civil officials, foreign envoys and notable merchants. In other households elaborately prepared dinners were served, and in general everyone enjoyed the occasion with drinks, music,



visitation, and exchanges of gifts and pleasantries. Children were particularly happy, and enjoyed the holidays running around, receiving various gifts, playing various games (specially the “egg-cracking game,” similar to the children’s game of conkers played with chestnuts in the West), and watching polo, wrestling, and horse racing. The gifts exchanged depended on the status of the individuals. The shah sat in the audience hall and distributed gifts, usually gold and or silver coins placed in small colorful bags, to the courtiers, kinsfolk, household servants and foreign envoys. He received in turn precious gifts from his harem, ministers, representatives of social groups and professions, provincial governors, and envoys of neighboring countries. The usual “gifts” to the shah included slave girls (especially from Armenia and Georgia, some of whom ended up as royal wives and others were given to favorite officials), money, prized horses, and beasts of burden with precious saddlery (for the gifts exchanged between the governor of Fārs province and Shah ‘Abbās I see Arberry, p. 19). The shah and rich notables also ordered the slaughter of livestock according to religious rites and distributed the meat to the needy. During the following days, people went outdoors and spent the time in the open air playing, feasting, horseracing and, when possible, hunting.

[Nāder Shah Afshar](#) (r. 1736-47) always celebrated Nowruz by holding a feast and distributing gifts and robes of honor, as did [Karim Khan Zand](#) (r. 1751-79) and his successors (see bibliography). In the Qajar period (1779-1925), the public practices were similar to the contemporary observances (see below), but the official celebration (*salām*, lit. ‘greeting’) underwent elaborations. Generally, the shah received guests consisting of kinsmen, military and civil official, leading religious figures, tribal chiefs, poets, heads of various guilds, and, increasingly, foreign notables. Nāṣer-al-Din Shah (r. 1848-96) began to regiment the festivities by introducing military bands, sending invitation cards, and holding *salām* into three audience sessions. The *salām-e taḥwil* (‘greeting for the turn of the year’) started an hour before the turning of the year and lasted for about four hours. The table of *haft sin* was prepared in front of the Peacock Throne in the Museum Hall (*tālār-e muza*), and dignitaries gathered around it: military officials headed by the crown prince on the one side, civil officials headed by the chief finance minister (*mostowfi-al-mamālek*) on the other side; the leading clergy, Qajar princes carrying royal arms and insignia, and cabinet ministers headed by the prime minister (*ṣadr-e a‘zam*) flanked the throne. The Master of Ceremonies announced the arrival of the shah, who appeared bedecked in jewelry and proceeded, among the bowing of the silent audience, to the throne and took his seat. The court orator (*kaṭīb-al-*



mamālek) would read a sermon in praise of the Prophet and the first Imam until the court astronomer announced the turning of the year. The shah offered his felicitations first to the ulama and then to the officials, recited some verses of the Qor’ān, drank a sip of water, and presented gifts (coins inside small red-silk bags) to the clergymen, who took their leave forthwith. Then the music band played cheerful tunes, and the shah distributed gifts to the audience and left for the inner quarter of the palace (*andarun*). On the second day, a general audience was held in the Marble Palace (*salām-e ‘āmm-e tak̄t-e marmar*). The shah and senior Qajar princes carrying royal regalia assembled, together with civil and military officials, received foreign envoys and presented them with gifts, paying particular attention to the Ottoman ambassador. Then the shah sat on a bejeweled chair placed upon the Marble Throne, and his aid announced the start of the public (*‘āmma*) audience, whereupon music bands played, cannons roared, drums beat, and trumpets sounded. The poet laureate recited a poem in honor of Nowruz and in praise of the shah, and the official orator closed the ceremony with a flamboyantly eulogistic address. On the third day, the *salām-e sar-e dar*, a truly jovial public occasion, was held in the Marble Palace. The shah appeared on a balcony accompanied by officials as well as favorite womenfolk and attendants, and the public participated in the festivities. Ropedancers, keepers, and trainers monkeys, bears, and fighting rams entertained the crowd in front of the palace, and received their rewards. Court jesters made everyone laugh, and wrestlers fought for the highly coveted position of the supreme paladin (*pahlavān-e pāyetākt*), which entailed receiving a special armband. On the thirteenth day (*sizdah bedar*) people moved out of the towns and celebrated the end of Nowruz in parks, gardens, and along the streams (see below).

In recent times, the official celebrations were condensed into one day of public audience, broadcast since the 1940s by the radio and since the 1960s by the television. These media have tended to standardize the Nowruz ceremonies and, consequently, a great deal of regional variations is fast disappearing.

In Contemporary Persia. Nowruz remains the single most important national festival of the Iranians who celebrate it with considerable zeal and pomp (Zoroastrian practices are treated separately). In the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, attempts were made by some influential clerical authorities to dampen public enthusiasm for Nowruz, and there was a discernible tension between the various factions on the amount of freedom and scope allowed for the display of public jubilation and display of



nationalistic sentiments during the Nowruz period. But this somewhat austere and puritanical approach was soon toned down: partly because of the Iran-Iraq war (see [IRAQ vii. IRAN-IRAQ WAR](#)) and the sentiments that it aroused, and partly because of the overall policy of the leaders of the Islamic Republic in the post-Khomeyni period to depict the regime as both religious and culturally proud of its ancient heritage. In this way, the fate of this festival is akin to the reception of that other 'Iranian' symbol, the *Šāh-nāma*, which also suffered only a brief and partial eclipse. Moreover, as has already been stated, the present-day religious authorities have a veritable arsenal of literature at hand in the voluminous corpus of religious discourse from the Safavids onwards that incorporate Nowruz into Shi'ite lore and popular anecdotal literature.

At present, government offices are closed for five days and educational institutions for thirteen. Houses are cleaned, and new clothes obtained. A fortnight before Nowruz, wheat (or barley, or both, sometimes lentil and other seeds as well) are grown in earthenware plates or in a bag of thin cloth wrapped around a clay jar. In rural areas the *nowruz-kvānān*, that is, minstrels consisting of boys, youths, and even adults, go around at evenings before Nowruz and stop before doors; they recite chants in praise of Nowruz, play on drums (*tonbak*) and tambourines, and receive rewards in kind or money. In 1842 Alexander Chodzko collected a good selection of such chants in Māzandarān (for contemporary chants see Maleki; Darviši; 'Onşori; Honari, pp. 107-16; Purkarim). Nowadays in cities, especially Tehran, [Ḥāji Firuz](#) performs the *nowruz-kvāni*.

In rural areas, many people still greet Nowruz by collecting rainwater for their Nowruz *sofra*, and by kindling bonfires on rooftops, in alleys or in courtyards. In towns this has become an elaborate ceremony on the evening of the last Wednesday of the year to kindle seven or nine fires and to jump over them while chanting a verse (see [ĀHĀRŠANBA SURI](#)). Until recently, a few days before Nowruz wooden arches were erected at street junctions, bazaars, and shops, and they were lavishly decorated with variegated carpets, tapestry, pictures, mirrors, flowers, and greeneries (Massé, I, pp. 145-46). At present, fruits, sweets, and colored eggs are placed in containers together with pitchers of rose water and pure water. People of every call and means stroll around or get busy buying large quantities of sweets, fruits, and dry nuts. The sweets, most importantly the *sowhān*, *samanu/samani*, and small cookies made with chickpea or rice flour, are prepared at home or bought from confectioneries.



Most favored fruits used to be apples, sour orange, lemon, quince, grapes, and pomegranate, but now various oranges, pears, even bananas, etc., are in style. The nuts include pistachios, shelled almond and walnut, and roasted chickpeas, all mixed with melon seeds, dried apricots, raisins, and dried mulberries (see [ĀJIL](#)). The fruits, sweets, and nuts are placed in the *sofra-ye haft sin*, together with bowls of water (one containing a red fish) and milk, candles and colored eggs, a mirror, the *sabze*, a few garlic cloves, vegetables (tarragon, leek, spring onions, basil, etc.), some new coins, a copy of the Qor’ān (or other holy scriptures, depending on the faith of the household), some cheese, and a container of *samanu/samani* (see [HAFT SIN](#)). Greeting cards of all sorts and contents are sent to family and friends. Families in bereavement do not celebrate Nowruz. Many still believe that the departed souls of relatives will visit the house on the eve of Nowruz, and the houses are accordingly cleaned and a meal, or *ranginak* (a sort of pastry with pitted dates), or *ahlā* (sweetmeat made with rice flour, sugar, and saffron) is prepared and distributed (either in the streets or cemeteries) as offerings in memory of the departed ancestors (Honari, pp. 58-63 with literature; cf. Faqiri, 1971), in the tradition of Fravardagān (see [FRAWARDIGĀN](#)). Also, there is still a widespread belief that on the morning of Nowruz a child or a handsome adult must knock at the door and when asked “who is it?” and “what have you brought?” reply: “I am the fortune and I bring health and prosperity” (Inostrantsev, pp. 100-10, tr. Kāzemzāda, pp. 107-108; cf. Honari, pp. 53, 97, 141-42).

On the eve of Nowruz special kinds of bread are baked, and a meal (usually fish with rice pilaf mixed with herbs) is consumed. Lights from bonfires illuminate many a rural house and village, and candles burn on graves, often accompanied by dishes of sweets, again as offerings to the dead. Meanwhile festive bands go around singing, dancing, and playing music, usually receiving gifts from neighborhood families. The exact moment of the “turning of the year” is announced in advance. In anticipation, families gather around the *haft-sin* table, many reciting prayers intended to impart good will to all. As soon as the year “turns,” children and in-laws get up and kiss the hands of the father and mother (or other elders if present), and offer their greetings. They themselves are in return kissed on the cheek (males) or forehead (female), and given their gifts (usually new banknote, occasionally gold or silver coins), and then the junior members of the family go through the same procedure with their elder siblings or in-laws. Customary congratulatory exclamations are: “May your Nowruz be happy!” (*Nowruz-e* [or *‘eyd-e*] *šomā mobāarak* [or *kojasta/farḵonda*] *bāšad*), “May health, victory, and prosperity be with you this



year and many (or a thousand) years to come!” And to the elders: “May God save you for us!” (*Ķodā sāya-ye šomā-rā az sar-e mā kam nakonad*, lit. ‘May God not diminish your shadow over our head!’). Replies are normally the same and for the last phrase run something like this: “May you be under the protection of God (often adding: and of Morteżā ‘Ali!)” Then some sweets, nuts, and colored eggs are distributed among those present, and water is drunk for bringing health and happiness. The candles are not put out (certainly not by blowing on them) but left to be burned all the way. Immediately afterwards (or in the following morning if the year has turned during late night), kinfolks, household servants, friends, and acquaintances visit each other, go through the same ritual, are welcomed by the offer of rosewater, and partake of sweets and other delicacies. Those families who are in mourning usually visit the graves of the departed and pray, then return home. After that, the elders and notables of the society and the kindred visit them but without observing the customary ceremonies of Nowruz, merely wishing them health and long life and pray that no loss may befall the family again.

Children specially love Nowruz. They do not need to work, go to school, or be restricted in play; they wear new clothes, receive gifts, and play various games, particularly the “egg-cracking” and tipcat (similar to baseball and played with wooden sticks, see [ALAK-DOLAK](#)).

The following days are spent in visiting friends, going on picnics, and, increasingly, traveling to other cities and countries. Particularly favorite sites include Persepolis (I registered 1,330,749 visitors on 21 March 1976), Isfahan, Mašhad, and other historic monuments, as well as holy sanctuaries and shrines or the Caspian or Persian Gulf resorts for the more affluent. The thirteenth day is the “outing day,” and every family gets out, throws the plate of *sabza* away (while making a wish that with it all mishaps may be averted), finds a spot in a park, garden, or along a stream, spreads a carpet on the ground, and enjoys the day by playing chess, backgammon, cards, *alak-dolak*, etc, singing, dancing, chatting merrily, and listening to music. Elaborate meals are cooked and large quantities of fruits, nuts, drinks, and sweets consumed. Having thus bidden Nowruz a worthy goodbye, they return joyfully to their living places in the evening.

In other lands. Nowruz has been celebrated with considerable zeal amongst the nations of Iranian background inhabiting other lands, namely, the Tajiks, Afghans, and Kurds of Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. In Tajikistan, particularly in the province of Badakšān, Nowruz is “the Great Festival” and “the inherited



national festival,” symbolizing friendship and renovation of all beings (Sulaqāni, p. 245). Various sweet dishes are prepared, and, in accordance with an old custom, before Nowruz the matriarch of the house places a pair of red brooms in the upright position in front of the house entrance, and hangs a piece of red cloth over the lintel—red being the color of happiness and blessed times. The family’s most important belongings are gathered outside, all doors and windows left opened, the house meticulously swept, and utensils thoroughly cleaned. Then the matriarch of the house re-enters, carefully replacing the furniture and utensils, and prepares for the arrival of Nowruz. Visitation, greetings, and partaking of the sweets and drinks follow. The guests are entertained with sumptuous meals, particularly the *bāj* (head and trotters of a sheep cooked with whole wheat), and there then follow outdoor games, among which *tāb-bāzi* (playing on swings), egg-cracking, and wrestling are common (Sulaqāni, pp. 245-46).

In Afghanistan, Nowruz is the official holiday, and in the Balk area it is also called “the Feast of Red Roses” (*jašn-e gol-e sorḳ*). The rites associated with welcoming the holiday (cleaning houses and buying new clothes, preparing sweet dishes and elaborate meals) and with celebrating it (school holidays, visitation, exchange of gifts, partaking of sweets and fruits) are much the same as in Persia (Sulaqāni, pp. 248-49; Makāri; Naba’i; Hamilton, p. 388). Even the preparation of the meal for the departed souls is customary (Honari, p. 61). In Herat, the special meal is rice pilaf and rooster stew. The men who are betrothed, send Nowruzi gifts to their brides, including a rooster, sweet dishes, and a set of clothes. Shortly before the “turning of the year,” men gather in mosques and shrines, and local priests recite prayers and write them on paper using as ink the water mixed with saffron contained in copper tubs; each man drinks a sip of the saffron water (*āb-e zaḡarāni*), and some also take a bowl of it home for their family, viewing it as a symbol of blessing and abundance. The *haft-sin* spread (*sofra*) is not usual, but the *samani* (called *samanak* in Herat) and *sizdah bedar* are. Outdoor games, particularly wrestling and *bozkaši* (lit. ‘goat-dragging,’ an equestrian game) follow the usual visitation and indoor entertainment. A particular custom is to raise an ‘*alam*. In Mazār-e šarīf region it is called ‘*alam-e mobārak*’ (attributed to Imam ‘Ali) and is raised by the elders and notables on the morning of the first Nowruz day and taken down forty days later. During this period, it is an object of public veneration, and various votives are offered to it and boons are sought from it. The holidays continue for a time, but two days are especially important: the first *čahāršanba* (Wednesday) and the *sizdah*. The first Wednesday rivals the



usages of *sizdah* in Persia: people prepare special meals and spend the day outdoor in merrymaking and playing games. The day is especially joyful for women, who gather in gardens and peacefully party, sing, dance, and play, especially in the swing. Watching cock fights and camel fights is also common (Makāri, pp. 221-26).

All Kurds celebrate Nowruz with enthusiasm, even in lands where their traditions do not meet with official sanction. Great quantities of sweets and fruits are consumed, and women ceremoniously cook *samani*. Everywhere elaborate bonfires are kindled and fireworks (on hill tops and roofs, in streets and the countryside) are accompanied by music, dancing, singing, and picnicking. In some areas the setting up of the “Nowruzian king” is still practiced (Mokri; Minorski, pp. 102-03; Keyvān, pp. 59-140; Bois, p. 477).

Wherever Persian culture has gone Nowruz has gone with it. Moqaddasi witnessed it celebrated in traditional Iranian way in Yemen (pp. 45, 100). In the Fatimid Egypt, Nowruz was observed as a national festival with all its Persian rituals: wearing new clothes, sprinkling water, kindling fire, carnivals, singing and playing music, official public receptions, exchanges of gifts, recitation of congratulatory poems, and distributing alms (al-Ṣayyād, pp. 115-26, citing Qalqašandi, Maqrizi, and Nowayri). A text, allegedly written by Ptolemy and based on the predictions of the Prophet Daniel, was circulated, which described the qualities of Nowruz according to its place in any of the seven days of the week and in relation to planets and the Nile River (Hārūn, V, pp. 47-8). It was later adapted by Safavid scholars in describing the qualities of Nowruz based on astrological and calendrical associations (see [HAFTA](#)). Despite some opposition, Nowruz continued to be celebrated in Egypt albeit somewhat modified, and survives to this day (Lane, 1895, Chap. 26; for contemporary Egyptian Nowruz poems see pp. 127-29). In Spain, Ebrāhim Hoṣri al-Qayrawāni found it useful to give a collection of the congratulatory phrases used at Nowruz (II, pp. 1005-1006). Moslem dynasties of the Indian subcontinent observed the Nowruz rites ardently and fully (Taqawi; Čudahri, pp. 31-37) as did the Ottoman sultans and officials (Carra de Vaux), the amirs of Bukhara (Olufsen, p. 367), and the people of Central Asia and the Caucasus (Inostrantsev, pp. 100ff.; ‘Abd-Allāh Jān;). In Northern Tāleš (‘Abdali) and Arrān (now in the Republic of Azarbaijan) Nowruz is a national holiday, and buying of new clothes, cleaning and repainting houses, carnival-style minstrelsy and firework (*Čahāršanba suri*), and visiting relatives and friends are customary, as are the Nowruz-*k*vāni and preparation of the Nowruz table



with candles, water, flowers, sweets, fruits, colored eggs, and the *samani*. The latter is considered the symbol of Nowruz and celebrated in folk poetry, for example “Samani, look after me; I will prepare you every year” (Madadli; ‘Abdali). The four Wednesdays before Nowruz are days of festivities commemorating the four acts of creation, and are called Water Wednesday, Fire Wednesday, Earth Wednesday, and Air or Trees Wednesday (Fuad Aliyev, pers. comm. dated 2 February 2002).

Muslim Indian immigrants took Nowruz to South Africa (Iren) and sailors carried it together with the Persian (Zoroastrian-style) calendar to East Africa and to the coasts of the Indian Ocean (Khareghat). The Swahilis have retained much of the Nowruz (vocalized as *Nairuzi*) ceremonies but adapted them to their beliefs and local rites: a feast is held one week before Nairuzi, then comes fishing and collecting wood in bundles for five days. On the sixth day, another banquet follows, the Qur’ān is recited, and on the next day people go to the beach, bathe, put on new clothes, sing and dance. After a ceremonial meal all fires are extinguished and later rekindled by the primitive method of fire sticks (for details see Gray; Freeman-Grenville). In recent years Nowruz has again come in favor in Turkey. On 21-23 March 2000 a symposium was held in Ankara for studying the observance of Nowruz in the Turkic-language regions, and the papers were published in *Uluslararası Nevruz Sempozyumu bildirileri: 21-23 Mart 2000, Ankara* (see bibliography). They demonstrate the wide spread of Nowruz celebrations and joyous songs associated with it among the peoples speaking Turkic languages: the Nachchevanis, Turkmens, peoples of Sivas, Afyonkarahisa, northern Caucasus and Central Asia, the Alavid Bektashis of Anatolia, the Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, and the Altay Turks. Also there are useful accounts of the Nowruz-related folklore and plant symbolism in Anatolia, and on practices common to various groups. They contain solid data which demonstrate the wide spread observation of the Nowruz. Most recently, Iranian communities abroad have popularized Nowruz and *sizdah bedar* far beyond the borders of Persia and the sphere of Persian culture.

For a music sample, see [Eydetun mobārak](#).

For a music sample, see [Newroz](#).

For a music sample, see [Nowruze-ḵuni](#).



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Presented to Edward G. Browne, M.A., M.B., F.B.A., F.R.C.P., Sir Thomas Adam's Professor of Arabic in the University of Cambridge, on his 60th Birthday (7 Febr. 1922), ed. T. W. Arnold, R. A. Nicholson, and E. G. Browne, Cambridge, 1922, pp. 106-16.

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