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Nowruz (Persian New Year)

Note: People in Iran write in a different alphabet than we do. This means that there are many different ways to render words or phrases phonetically into English. Therefore, you will see many different spellings of the phrase for the Persian new year: No Rooz , Norouz, No Ruz, Nowruz, etc. The name of the holiday is pronounced No (like the English word “no”) and Ruz (that rhymes with “choose”). It means “New Day,” representing a new beginning.

Nowruz (the Persian new year) is the most beloved holiday in Iran, originating in ancient Persia over 3000 years ago. The holiday is celebrated in other countries as well as Iran: Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan as well as among the Kurds of Iraq and Turkey and the Zoroastrians of India and Pakistan. Even in the United States and Canada, cities with large Iranian diaspora communities (including Tucson and Phoenix) hold celebrations too.

Nowruz today is not a religious holiday though its roots are in the Zoroastrian religion. (The holiday pre-dates Islam.) The Persian new year begins on the first day of spring, on March 20 or 21. As in the West (but unlike in the Arab world), the Persian traditional calendar is a solar one, based on the earth’s rotation around the sun. Therefore, one of their years is the same length (365 days) as one of our years. However, Iranians start counting on a different day of the year and at a different point in history. Thus, we say it is the year 2020 (from mid-March to the end of December) or 2021 (from January 1 – March 20); they say it was 1399 - on March 21, 2021 it will become the year 1400! (Note: The beginning date has to do with Iranian – not Islamic – history.)

The Persian New Year is a joyful holiday, and all its symbolism centers around the end of winter (cold, dark) and renewal of life (more hours of sunshine – the Spring Equinox, everything growing). When you think of springtime, what pictures come into your mind? Flowers? Grass? Colored eggs and the Easter bunny? The Persian New Year has a lot of these same symbols. Before the new year, people give their homes a “spring cleaning” and decorate with flowers. People also dye and decorate eggs (like our Easter eggs), and the symbolism is the same – the eggs hatch, and new life emerges. Most people also buy a goldfish, believing that if they can keep it alive for the whole year, then they will have good luck. (Of course, if one can keep it alive for more than a year, that’s even better!) People also begin growing greenery (often lentils which grow quickly even without soil) so as to create a traditional decoration: the “Haft Seen.” This is a display

with seven things that begin with the Persian letter “s” (“Haft Seen” means “Seven S’s”). In the middle is the, “sabzi,” or greenery, growing on the plate, and around it there are other things like garlic and apples, which each begin with “s” in the Persian language.

Nowruz is a favorite holiday of children. Like Christmas in the U.S., children get presents. They also get a long holiday from school and go to many of parties and family get-togethers. (Note that most Iranians are not Christians and therefore do NOT celebrate Christmas. Nowruz is their biggest holiday of the year.) There are lots of parties, lots of people visiting relatives and friends, especially on the first day of the new year. Large quantities of food are served though unlike American New Year’s parties, there is no liquor because of the Muslim prohibition against drinking. Also unlike American New Year’s celebrations, Iranian ones are for people of all ages: children as well as adults. Traditionally, there is plenty of music and dancing. (People of all ages and both genders do a form of belly dancing.) Iran’s Islamic government tries to discourage this practice and, in fact, tries to downplay the entire holiday since it is a secular, not a religious, celebration.

Although the main Nowruz celebration occurs on the first day of spring, the festivities last for about two weeks. On the last Wednesday of the old year, Iranians build bonfires and jump over them. This symbolizes the idea, deriving from the ancient Zoroastrian religion, of light winning out over dark, spring over winter, good over evil. The holiday ends on the thirteenth day of the year (early April) when people set out for picnics in the countryside, taking the greenery they have grown as part of the Haft Seen. The greenery, which is said to have collected all sickness and bad luck, is thrown into a river, so that the current can sweep away all bad luck. People also try to trick each other into believing something that is not true, a tradition very much like our April Fool’s Day.

Thus, Nowruz is an important holiday throughout northwestern and central Asia. So if you encounter an Iranian or Afghani or Kurd in the middle of March, be sure to wish him/her a happy holiday!