

Nowruz in Islam

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Nowruz is the traditional Iranian festival of spring which starts at the exact moment of the vernal equinox, commencing the start of the spring.

It is considered as the start of the New Year among Iranians. The name comes from Avestan meaning “new day/daylight”. Noruz is celebrated March 20/21 each year, at the time the sun enters Aries and Spring begins.

Noruz has been celebrated for at least 3,000 years and is deeply rooted in the rituals and traditions of the Zoroastrian religion. Today the festival of Noruz is celebrated in Iran, Iraq, India, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

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The word `Nowruz` is a compound word; No and Ruz together mean New Day, and it is the name of the first day of the first solar month, `when the Sun in Aries`. In the original Pahlavi (ancient language of Iran) word it means the tip of ruzh or the tip of the day. Abū Rayhān al-Bīrūnī in his definition of Nowruz says: `It is the first day of the month of Farvardin and the reason it is called New Day is that it is the forehead of the year ...` Historians and scholars have differed about the status of Nowruz. It is believed that from the time of the migration of the Aryans to the Iranian Plateau and bordering with the civilizations of Mesopotamia, they divided the year into two parts and the celebrations of Nowruz and Mehregan (harvest festival) were the beginning of these two sections. Nowruz was celebrated marking the summer solstice and the Mehregan was celebrated marking the beginning of winter.

The emergence of Islam and its peaceful dealing with other religious beliefs and rituals, including ceremonies and rituals of the Iranian people, resulted in Nowruz to remain untouched. It was only due to the gradual conversion of Iranians to Islam that the scale of these celebrations was reduced. Over the time, when some customs and traditions would be contrary to the past beliefs, Iranian tried to rediscover their ancient characters

and symbols through Islamic characters; in another words, they mixed their Iranian traditions with their Islamic belief. Islamic traditions associate Nowruz with the day when angel Gabriel appeared to Prophet Mohammad (pbuh), the day of Ghadeer and the day of the re-emergence of The Lord of our Time, Imam Mahdi (aj). On the other hand, in Iranian ancient belief, Nowruz is the day when the Creator finished the creation of the world and is the day when Man was created.

In addition to no-opposition stance of Islam in regards to the rituals of Nowruz, and further confirmation of it, continuation of commemoration of Nowruz during the Islamic period can also be attributed to the Persians continuing interest to preserve their ancient heritage. According to Bertold Spuler, a Persian historiographer and geographer; Muslims, especially at the time of Omar II (Omar ibn Abdulaziz) tried to ignore Nowruz celebrations, but this custom was so deeply associated with the Iranian people's thought and feelings that soon Nowruz successfully found its own place and with the rise of the Abbasids, and later the Shi'i Buwayyeds it widely spread, becoming a regular tradition in Mesopotamia. It was also celebrated in Syria, Egypt and North Africa but not regularly. After the spread of Islam and its adaptation by the people of Iran, Nowruz found its way to expand to wider range of people even amongst non- Iranian tribes, such in Indian continent and North Africa. The respect for Nowruz in Shi'i Islam, although not exclusive to Shia, is very noticeable.

Nowruz has been highly regarded. Alameh Majlesi in Assamae va al Alam has narrated one of the sayings of Imam Sadiq (a) as follows: ` With the beginning of Farvardin, human was created, and this day is an auspicious day for praying to seek dreams, to visit the nobles, acquiring knowledge, marriage, travelling and good business. In this blessed day the sick will be cured, the babies are born hassle free and sustenance will increase.` Majlesi also talks about another narration from Imam Musa Kadhim (as) which says: `In Nowruz Allah made a covenant with His servants to worship Him and not to allow any partner for Him. To welcome, His messengers and obey their rulings. This day is the first day that the fertile wind blow and the flowers on the earth appeared. The archangel Gabriel (a) appeared to the Prophet, and it is the day that Abraham (as) broke the idols. The day Prophet Muhammad (S) held Ali (as) on his shoulders to destroy the Quraishies' idols in the house of God, the Kaaba.` Regardless of the Abbasid dynasty ups and downs they managed to maintain their political and religious influence in the Muslim world for more than five centuries, and the endorsement by subsequent Caliph has contributed to celebration of Nowruz, its expansion and continuity.

Nowruz in the Safavids period adopted an Islamic pattern, so separating its ancient Iranian roots from its Islamic traditions would have been extremely difficult. Nowruz had certain grandeur in Abbasids and Safavids courts and Islam perfumed the great celebration of Nowruz with its Islamic traditions. In addition the most symbolic rituals of

Nowruz which is the preparation of `seven S` has both ancient and Islamic roots. In his research `Nowruz and the Philosophy of Seven S` Mohammad Ali Dadkhah explains: `Number seven, is sacred and part of the elite. The choice of this number in the preparation of Nowruz is very significant. In the ancient Iran this number was associated with seven holy immortals. In astronomy number seven is the house of dreams, and accomplishing wishes is promised in the seventh abode.` Alameh Majlesi in regards to the importance of number seven says: `The heaven and Earth each have seven levels and each level is guarded by an angel.` He also says: `If at the time of New Year, one recites seven verses of Qur'an which starts with letter S, one would be protected against any afflictions`. The holiness of the New Year moments in the eyes of the people is so colourful and real that they make pilgrimage to holy shrines of Imams and their families. For example in Iran people go to Shiraz for Shahcheragh and Ali ibn Hamze (as); to Mashad for Imam Redha (as), to Qum for Lady Masoumeh (as) and to city of Ray for Shah Abdulazim (as). Although Nowruz in Iran has attained an Islamic identity, and that the majority of population in Iran is Muslim, nonetheless this has never stopped the followers of other religions enjoying the celebration of Nowruz all the same. Nowruz Invocation Unfortunately there are no mentions of the New Year invocation in known supplication books, which means there are no reliable evidences in Sunni or Shia sources about it. But Alameh Majlesi in his book Zad al Maad mentions the existence of some reports in some less known sources. One of which is the following invocation that is highly recommended to be recited repeatedly. O Moulder of the hearts and vision, O Master of the night and day, O He who changes stratagem and status, Transform our situation to the best condition The above invocation at the time of Safavids was a regular prayer for the New Year.

The fact that recitation of supplications or Qur'an and performing of prayer for the coming of a new year actually did happen, itself, is a sign of the Islamisation of this festivity. The concept of Eid (festivity) in Islam The word Eid in the Holy Qur'an has been mentioned only once in the verse 114, chapter 5 (Maa'idah). `Said Jesus son of Mary, O Allah! Our Lord! Send down to us a table from the sky, to be a festival for us, for the first ones and the last ones among us and as a sign from You, and provide for us; for You are the best of providers` (114:5) Eid on its own is a verb; it means to return. Return of happy anniversaries and commemorations are also called Eid. According to Islamic Law, Eid is a day in which a benefit or interest is gained and a day when a special prayer is performed and people congregate. The days of AlAzha (Qurban) and of Al Fitr are also Eid days. Verse 114 of Chapter 5 (Maa'idah) where Prophet Isa (as) asked for food from Heaven is taken as the day of miracle and that day is considered for all human as Eid. Eid, in this verse is referring to a Divine blessing descended from heaven in the form of a tray, or trays of delicious and edible food, so it became a sign for people to commemorate such day every year and bring joy and happiness repeatedly. Also

repetition and return of such days could return same blessings which give us, human, another chance to make connection with God and remembering Him in our hearts and by our tongues. Islamic rituals of Nowruz In Mafatih al Jinan, which in the past decades has been one of the greatest books for religious recommended acts of worship, we read that the Prayer of Nowruz is a prayer combined of recitation of Al -Fatiha, Al-Qadr, Al-Kaferoon, ALTawhid, Al-Falagh, Al-Nass and many other chapters of the Holy Qur'an. It is similar to a prayer which not only has the forms of Friday prayer but also the attributes of the prayers of Ghadeer Khum. Mafatih Al Jinan narrates from Imam Jafar Al Sadiq(as): 'When Nowruz comes, make Ghosl (ceremonial wash) , put on your clean clothes, and fragrant yourself with best perfumes, so when you are free of all other prayers, perform a four- rakaat prayer, each rakaat one Salam and in the first rakaat after Sura Al- Fateha ten times Sura Al-Qadr, and in the second rakaat after Al-Fateha ten times Al-Kaferoon. In the thried rakaat after Al-Feteheh ten times Al-Nass and Al-Falaq. After prayer prostrate in gratification.'

As we can see the rituals of Nowruz is the same as rituals for any other Islamic Eids of which its supplication starts with offering salutations to the messenger of Allah and his progeny and all the messengers of God. Nowruz has always been celebrated by Iranians. Its customs, despite the thousands of years, has never been demolished or forgotten. Nowruz has been a festivity celebrated by all the tribes, ethnic groups or religions that existed and lived in the Iranian Plateau for centuries and today many other countries, influenced by the culture of Iran such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and even some central Asian countries such as Kurds of Turkey, Iraq and Syria celebrate it too.

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