

Middle Eastern Festivals

Islamic:

Moulid el-Nabi, Milad, Milad an-Nabi, or Mawlid un-Nabi (The Prophet's Birthday)

Prophet Muhammad (also Mohammed, Muhammed, Mahomet, and other variants) is the founder of Islam and is regarded by Muslims as the last messenger and prophet of God. Muhammad was born in the year 570 AD and his birthday is celebrated each year on 12 Rabi el-Awal, following the Islamic calendar. Processions are held, homes or mosques are decorated, charity and food is distributed, stories about the life of Muhammad are narrated, and poems are recited by children. The main purpose of Moulid el-Nabi gatherings is to remember, observe, discuss and celebrate the advent of the birth and teachings of the holy Prophet Muhammad.

Ramadan

Ramadan is a celebration that takes place in the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, when the Quran (the central religious text of Islam) was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. The name of the feast is the name of the month. Muslims celebrate Ramadan for an entire month. It is a time for prayers (some people pray 5 times a day), friendship, and thinking about how to help others. Many people fast during the hours of daylight for the entire month. Before the sun rises, families gather to eat a big breakfast. This breakfast before dawn is called *Suhoor* (also called *Sehri*, *Sahari* and *Sahur* in other languages). Each family member then fasts until the sun sets in the evening. After the sun sets, they have a big supper. This evening meal for breaking the daily fast is called *Iftar* and is often done as a community, with Muslims gathering to break their fast together. Following supper, many people go out to visit family and friends.



In Egypt, people decorate the streets and their houses with lanterns called *fanoos* or *fanoos*. Often children are given their own Ramadan fanoos. The fanoos has become the symbol of Ramadan and is now found in other areas of the Middle East as well.

Eid el-Fitur, Eid ul-Fitr, or Id-Ul-Fitr (Feast of the Breaking the Fast)

Eid-ul-Fitr marks the breaking of the fast for Muslims at the end of Ramadan. The celebration lasts three days during which time families and friends get together to celebrate with good food and give to charity. Food is often donated to the poor and

everyone is expected to pay *Zakat al-Fitr*, an alms, for the month of Ramadan. Everyone puts on their best, preferably new, clothes, and communal prayers are held in the early morning, followed by feasting and visiting with relatives and friends. Eid el-Fitur is a joyous occasion with important religious significance. It is a day of forgiveness, moral victory, fellowship, brotherhood and unity. Muslims celebrate not only the end of fasting, but also thank God for the help and strength he gave them throughout the previous month to help them practice self-control.

Chaand Raat (Night of the Moon)



Chaand Raat is the term used in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh for the eve of the Muslim festival of Eid el-Fitur. It is a time of celebration when families and friends gather in open areas at the end of the last day of Ramadan to spot the new moon, which signals the arrival of the Islamic month of Shawwal and the day of Eid. Women and girls decorate their hands with *mehndi* (henna), and people prepare desserts for the next day of Eid and do the last round of shopping for the holiday to

come. City streets wear a festive look, as seen in the picture above, with brightly decorated malls and markets that remain open late into the night. In socio-cultural significance, this night is comparable to Christmas Eve in Christian nations.

Eid el-Adha, Eid ul-Adha, or Eid el-Kbir (Feast of the Sacrifice)



The Festival of Sacrifice is the second most important feast in the Muslim calendar, occurring approximately 70 days after Eid al-Fitr. The feast celebrates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son to prove his obedience to God. Men, women, and children are expected to dress in their finest clothing and perform the festival prayer in any mosque (a place of worship for followers of the Islamic faith). Muslims who can afford to do so sacrifice an animal as a symbol of Abraham's sacrifice.

During this time, Muslims also make their annual pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. The *Dhu al-Hijja* or *Thw al-Hijja* is the twelfth and final month in the Islamic calendar. The Hajj Pilgrimage is performed on the eighth, ninth and the tenth of this month. Eid el-Adha is held on the tenth day.



Day of Ashura

The Day of Ashura is not a festival, but rather a sad event for both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. The event is the saddest event for Shi'a Muslims and it is a period of intense grief and mourning. The event is also observed by many Sunnis, but to a lesser extent, and as a time of remembrance, rather than mourning. The word *ashura* means simply *tenth* in Arabic; hence the name of the remembrance, literally translated, means “the tenth day.” On the tenth day of the Islamic calendar month of Muharram, the Day of Ashura is observed.

Sunni Muslims observe the Day of Ashura differently than the Shi'a Muslims. They believe that Moses fasted on that day to express gratitude to God for liberation of Israelites from Egypt. According to Sunni Muslim tradition, Muhammad fasted on this day and asked other people to fast.



Shi'a Muslims commemorate the death of Husayn ibn Ali by arranging *majalis* (gatherings) to review Islamic teachings and to commemorate Imam Husayn's sacrifice. The remembrance marks the anniversary of the Battle of Karbala (680 AD) when Husayn ibn Ali, a grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, was killed. The mourning reaches its climax on the tenth day, known as Ashura. This day is of particular significance to Shi'a Muslims, who consider Husayn the third Imam and a

rightful successor of Muhammad. Many Shi'a make pilgrimages on Ashura to the Mashhad al-Husayn, the shrine in Karbala, Iraq, which is traditionally held to be Husayn's tomb. Shi'as also express mourning by crying and listening to poems about the tragedy. Passion plays are also performed, reenacting the Battle of Karbala and the

suffering and death of Husayn. In the above picture, Shi'a Muslims in Bahrain congregate together in public for ceremonial chest beating (*matham* or *latmiya*) as a display of their devotion. This is intended to connect them with Husayn's suffering and martyrdom, and the sacrifices he made to keep Islam alive.

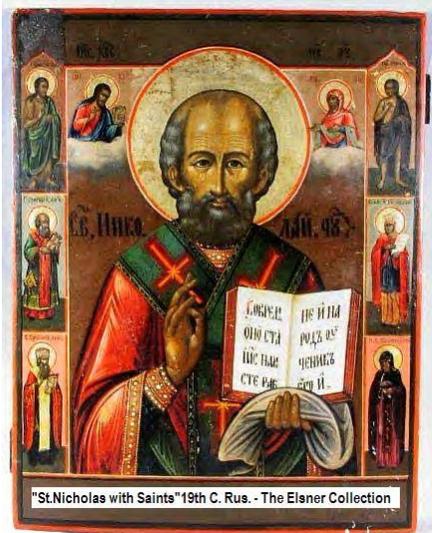
In some countries other religious communities commemorate this event. In Iran, some Armenians and Zoroastrians participate in mourning. In Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica all ethnic and religious communities participate in this event, locally known as "Hosay" or "Hussay." In South Asia, a number of literary and musical genres, produced by both Shi'as and Sunnis who have been inspired by the Battle of Karbala, are performed during the month. In Indonesia, the event is known as *Tabuik* or *Tabut*. *Tabuik* refers to the high funeral biers carried around during remembrance processions. (See pictures.) Although originally a Shi'a festival in Indonesia, nowadays most inhabitants of Pariaman and other areas where similar *Tabuik*-festivals are held are mainly Sunni Muslims.



Christian:

Christmas

Christmas is an annual holiday that marks the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Christmas is a Christian celebration that often combines the marking of Jesus' birth with various other traditions and customs. In Israel, Christmas comes three times each year. The Western Church celebrates on December 25 according to the Gregorian calendar, the Russian Church celebrates according to the Julian calendar, and the Armenian Church celebrates on January 6. Traditionally throughout the Middle East Christians visit friends on Christmas morning and are offered coffee, liqueurs and sugared almonds. Lunch at Christmas is the most important meal of the season and the whole family gathers together for it.



There are various customs related to different areas of the Middle East. In Lebanon, Christians plant seeds in cotton wool about two weeks before Christmas. By Christmas the seeds have grown and they are used as decoration around nativity scenes. In Syria, on Christmas Eve, the outer gates of Christian homes are locked as a reminder of the years of religious persecution. The family prepares a bonfire in the courtyard and reads the New Testament story of the nativity. After the fire dies down, they take turns jumping over the embers and making wishes. Christians in Iran, call Christmas the "Little Feast" and Easter the "Big Feast." During the month of December, Christians in Iran fast by cutting out meat, eggs, milk, and cheese from their diet.

Christmas is a religious and family celebration. Gifts are not exchanged; however, children are usually given new clothes.

St. Nicholas (seen above) was a Turkish Bishop who had a reputation for secret gift-giving, but is now commonly identified with Santa Claus. In Myra, Turkey, a St. Nicholas Festival is held for three days around the saint's official Feast Day, December 6. The celebration attracts many tourists who spend their Christmas holidays on the sunny coast.

Epiphany

Epiphany is a Christian feast celebrating the revelation of God to mankind in human form, in the person of Jesus. For Western Christians the feast primarily commemorates the coming of the Magi, while in the Middle East the feast celebrates the Baptism of Christ in the Jordan. However, in both cases the essence of the feast is the same: the manifestation of Christ to the world.

In Jordan, Christians celebrate Epiphany on the banks of the Jordan River. In Syria, children receive gifts at Epiphany from "the smallest camel" of the Three Wise Men. Every year the Smallest Camel visits children with gifts for those who have been good.



Palm Sunday



Palm Sunday is also called the Sunday of Olives in the Middle East. The feast is celebrated the Sunday before Easter commemorating Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. According to tradition, the people waved palm branches and praised Jesus. Thus today, the palm branch is a symbol of triumph and victory. The Christians use the palm branch in the Palm Sunday festival celebrating the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. Christians take palm branches home with them after church on Palm Sunday to weave them into crosses, which they hang on their front doors.

Easter

Easter is the fundamental and most important festival of Christians in the Middle East. It is observed at some point between late March and late April each year following the cycle of the moon. Every other religious festival, including Christmas, is secondary in importance to the celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Orthodox Christians in the Middle East and in Greece paint eggs bright red to symbolize the blood of Christ. Hollow eggs (created by piercing the shell with a needle and blowing out the contents) are decorated with pictures of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and other religious figures in Armenia.

Jewish:

Passover (Pesach or Festival of Unleavened Bread)

Passover is the time when Jewish people remember how the children of Israel left slavery behind them when they left Egypt. It is a major eight-day festival. A highlight is the Seder meal held in each family's home at the beginning of the festival, when the story of their deliverance is recounted as narrated in the *Haggadah* (the Telling, the Story). *Matzah* (unleavened bread) is eaten throughout the festival, as are other foods that contain no leaven. There is a great spring cleaning in the home before the festival to ensure that no trace of leaven is left in the home during Pesach.

Rosh Hashanah & Yom Kippur

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are holidays celebrated by people of the Jewish religion. These holidays are 10 days apart and occur either in September or October. Together, the holidays are called the High Holy Days.

Rosh Hashanah, which lasts two days, is the Jewish New Year. Families and friends gather at synagogues for services led by a rabbi. To begin the services, the rabbi blows on a ram's horn, called a *shofar*. After the Rabbi gathers the people together, he reads from the Torah, a scripture that tells the history of the Jewish people. This festival marks the Jewish New Year and begins the ten days of repentance and self examination, during which time God sits in judgment on every person. The festival is also known as the Day of Judgment. A symbolic Rosh Hashanah meal is pictured to the right.



Ten days after Rosh Hashanah, people of the Jewish religion celebrate Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement). The days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are called the “Days of Awe.” Yom Kippur is a quiet time for thinking, praying and remembering acquaintances who have died. Many people fast during this holiday. Yom Kippur is the final day of the ten days of repentance. It is the holiest day in the Jewish religion (Sabbath of Sabbaths). As well as fasting for 25 hours, Jews spend the day in prayer, asking for forgiveness and resolving to behave better in the future.

Sukkot, Succoth, or Sukkos (Feast of Booths)

Sukkot is a harvest festival commemorating the 40 years that the Jews spent in the wilderness on the way from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. For this feast, Jews are instructed to construct a temporary structure (a *sukkah*) in which to eat their meals, entertain guests, relax, and even sleep. The sukkah is reminiscent of the type of huts in which the ancient Israelites dwelt during their 40 years of wandering in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt, and is intended to reflect God's benevolence in providing for all the Jews' needs in the desert. During the festival, some Jews build their own sukkah in the garden or at the synagogue. Jews eat their meals in the sukkah for the eight or nine days of the festival.

Hanukkah or Chanukah (Festival of Lights)



Hanukkah is an eight-day Jewish holiday beginning on the 25th day of the month of Kislev according to the Hebrew calendar. The festival is observed in Jewish homes by the kindling of lights on each night of the holiday. Hanukka, from the Hebrew word for "dedication," marks the re-dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem after its desecration and commemorates the "miracle of the cruze of oil." At the re-dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem there was only enough consecrated olive

oil to fuel the eternal flame in the Temple for one day. Miraculously, the oil burned for eight days.

Zoroastrian:

Nowruz (New Day)

Many important Zoroastrian annual festivals are in celebration of nature: new year on the first day of spring, the water festival in summer, the autumn festival at the end of the season, and the mid-winter fire festival. Zoroastrianism was once the dominant religion of much of Greater Iran. As of 2007 the faith has dwindled to small numbers; some sources suggest that it is practiced by fewer than 200,000 worldwide, with its largest centers in India and Iran.

The basis of many Iranian festivals is from its Pre-Islamic Zoroastrian era. However, there are some festivals that are celebrated exclusively by Zoroastrians and some to a lesser extent in other communities too. Today Nowruz is observed in many different cultures and areas of the world. (See secular festivals below.) Seasons play a vital part in Zoroastrianism. After a severe winter, the beginning of spring is a great occasion to celebrate. Prophet Zoroaster (Zarathushtra) was the architect of the pre-Islamic Iranian cosmology who instituted many feasts, festivals and rituals to pay homage to the seven creations, the holy immortals and Ahura Mazda. The seven most important ones are known as *Gahambars*, the feasts of obligation. The last and the most elaborate was Nowruz, celebrating Ahura Mazda and the Holy Fire at the spring equinox.

Nowruz survived in society following the introduction of Islam in 650 AD and has become a secular holiday as well. It was a festival honored even by the early founders of Islam. Nowruz has been celebrated for at least 3000 years and is deeply rooted in the rituals and traditions of the Zoroastrian religion.

Sadeh or Jashn-e Sadeh (Festival of Fire)

Sadeh is a Zoroastrian tradition celebrated 50 days before Nowruz. *Sadeh* in the Persian language means “hundred” which refers to the one hundred days and nights left until the beginning of the new year celebrated on the first day of spring each year. Sadeh is a mid-winter festival that was celebrated with grandeur and magnificence in ancient Iran. It was a festivity to honor fire and to defeat the forces of darkness, frost, and cold. This Zoroastrian festival survived into present-day Islamic society.

According to religious beliefs, Jashn-e Sadeh recalls the importance of light, fire and energy; light which comes from God is found in the hearts of his creatures. During ancient times, Jashn-e Sadeh was celebrated by lighting fires. The fire assists the revival of sun and brings back the warmth and light of summer. It is also meant to drive off the demons of frost and cold, which turn water to ice, and thus kill the roots of plants. Every year thousands of Zoroastrians celebrate the religious feast of Jashn-e Sadeh by burning firewood in an open space to signify the coming of spring and as a symbolic token of the eternal fight with mischief.



For Zoroastrians the chief preparation for Sadeh was, and continues to be in some areas, the gathering of wood the day before the festival. Teenage boys accompanied by a few adult males go to local mountains in order to gather camel thorns, a common desert shrub in Iran seen in the picture above. For most boys, this is the first time they are away from their families. The occasion resembles a ritual of passage to adulthood, a notable step for the boys on their way to manhood. The boys then take the camel thorns to the temples in their cities; and if it were their first time doing this, on their return, a celebration was held at home with the presence of friends and families.

Although for the majority of Iranians Sadeh has no religious significance and no specific rituals are involved other than lighting fires at sunset and having a cheerful time, Iranians of all faiths make a collective effort at this day to keep up with their ancient traditions and to celebrate the precious things God granted humanity.

Jashn-e Mihragān (Festival of Mihr)

The Festival of Mihr is a day of thanksgiving dedicated to the highest Angel, Mithra, an important deity or divine concept in Zoroastrianism and later Persian mythology and culture. By the 4th century BCE, it was observed as one of the Zoroastrian name-day feasts, a form it retains even today, even in (predominantly) Islamic Greater Iran where it is of the few pre-Islamic festivals that continue to be celebrated by the public at-large. In

a non-Zoroastrian context, where Mithra is no longer worshipped, Jashn-e-Mihragān still remains a celebration amongst family and friends, but it is today recognized as a harvest festival. The festival symbolically ends with bonfires and fireworks, but should not be confused with Sadeh, which likewise celebrates with bonfires but occurs at the end of the calendar year.

For this celebration, the participants wear new clothes and set a decorative, colorful table. The table is decorated with wild marjoram and traditional sweets, fruits, and vegetables are added to the table, along with a mirror. In some of the villages in Yazd, Zoroastrians still sacrifice sheep to Mihr. During the meal, the family stands in front of the mirror to pray. They drink sherbet and then rub antimony, a silvery white metalloid, around their eyes, as a ritual of good luck. As they embrace each other, they throw handfuls of marjoram, seeds, and sugar plums over each others' heads.

Yaldā or Shab-e Chelle (Winter Solstice)

Yaldā is celebrated on the eve of the first day of the winter, which falls on the Winter Solstice. It celebrates the birth of Sun god Mithra. The festival was considered extremely important in pre-Islamic [Iran](#) and continues to be celebrated to this day, for a period of more than 6000 years. Different cultures all over the world celebrate the Winter Solstice. In most ancient cultures, including Persia, the start of the solar year was marked to celebrate the victory of light over darkness and the renewal of the Sun.



The ancient form of the Yalda ceremony included burning fires, feasts, and prayers to ensure a good

winter crop. During this time one of the themes of the festival was the temporary subversion of order. Masters and servants reversed roles. The king dressed in white would change place with an ordinary person.

Today the religious significance of the festival has been lost for most non-Zoroastrians. Yaldā is an important social occasion, when family and friends get together for fun and merriment. Usually families gather at their elders homes. Different kinds of dried fruits, nuts, seeds and fresh winter fruits are consumed. (See the picture above.) The presence of dried and fresh fruits is reminiscence of the ancient feasts to celebrate and pray to the deities to ensure the protection of the winter crops.

Jashn-e Tiragan (The Festival of Tiragan)

Jashn-e Tiragan is a day dedicated to Tishtrya, the Angel of the star Sirius and of rain. Tishtrya refers to the angel who appeared in the sky to generate thunder and lightning for rain. Jashn-e Tiragan is a rain festival observed in July with the hope of increasing the harvest and countering drought. It is one of the three most widely celebrated feasts (along with Mihragan and Nowruz) of Zoroastrianism.

Today, people celebrate this festival with dancing, singing, reciting poetry and serving spinach soup and saffron rice pudding. Water is celebrated as children swim in streams and enjoy the outdoors. Another traditional custom for the festival is the wearing of rainbow-colored bands on the wrist. After ten days the bands are removed and thrown into a stream.

Secular:

Sham el-Nessim (Smelling the Breeze)

This Egyptian festival marks the beginning of spring and literally means “smelling the breeze.” Sham el-Nessim is celebrated by both Christians and Muslims so it is considered a national more than a religious festival. The beginning of this festival can be traced back as far as 2700 B.C. It is an ancient celebration that was originally related to agriculture, harvest, and fertility. In ancient times, Egyptians offered fish (a symbol of fertility and abundance), lettuce, and onions to their deities on this day.

Today, millions of Egyptians emerge from their homes on the day of Sham el-Nessim to enjoy the day outside. Families start at dawn preparing their food, then take their blankets with them and enjoy the breeze of spring. Traditional food are eating that celebrate the spring, including *fiseekh* (salted fish), boiled colored eggs, *termis* (lupin seeds), and green onions.

The International Festival of the Sahara

In Douz, Tunisia, each year people celebrate nomadic ways of life and their traditions. The first Festival of the Sahara in Douz in 1910 was called the Camel Festival. The festival has since grown and become an important part of the country’s modern identity. This four-day festival at the end of December attracts thousands of people from all over Tunisia and other Maghreb countries. The features of the festival include camel marathons, *fantasia* (galloping Arab horses ridden by daring riders), a Bedouin marriage, *sloughi* (desert hunting dog—see picture) catching rabbits.



In the evening, groups from visiting countries perform popular songs and dances. The central event of the festival is the annual poetry contest, which represents the desert's principal communication medium.

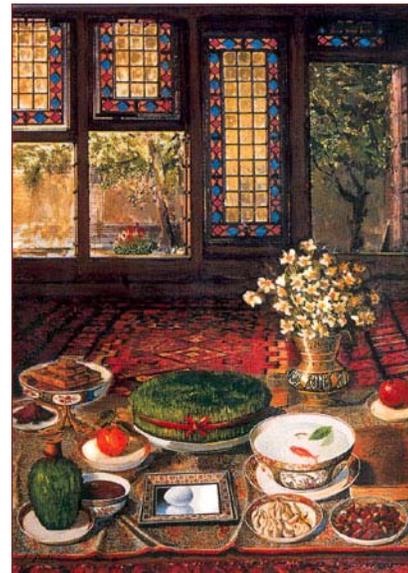
Nowrūz or Now Ruz (Iranian New Year)



Nowrūz is the traditional Iranian new year holiday celebrated in Iran, Northern Iraq, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Albania, Georgia, the countries of Central Asia such as Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, as well as among various other Iranian and Turkic people in Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, India, Northwestern China, the Caucasus, the Crimea, and the Balkans. The festival marks the first day of spring and the beginning of the new year and traditionally lasts for thirteen days. It is celebrated on the vernal equinox, the beginning of spring in the northern hemisphere by people regardless of their religion.

Current Nowruz celebrations include cleaning the house and treating each family member to new clothes and shoes, along with the purchase of flowers, particularly hyacinths and tulips. *Khane tekani* (literally meaning “shaking the house”) is an Iranian tradition of spring cleaning and part of the Nowruz festival, which stems from the Zoroastrian idea of purification through cleanliness. People usually wash carpets, paint houses, and clean yards and attics.

On the New Year's Day, families dress in their new clothes and start the twelve-day celebrations. Typically, on the first day of Nowruz, family members gather around the table, with the *Haft Sin* on the table or set next to it, and await the exact moment of the arrival of the spring. At the moment the New Year begins, the family members all kiss and hug one another, exchange gifts and eat the special food they have prepared. They then visit the elders of their family, then the rest of their family and finally their friends. On the thirteenth day families leave their homes and picnic outdoors.



The way a Nowruz table is prepared is particularly important. A lighted candle, mirror, colored egg, holy book, and a bowl with a goldfish are gathered together and placed on the table. Each object on the table has a unique symbol attached to it. The candle represents enlightenment and happiness, the mirror represents reflections on creation, the colored eggs symbolize fertility, a holy book represents the family's faith, and the goldfish represents life. The family will also set out a plate containing

seven items each beginning with the Persian letter “S”. *Haft Sîn* (the seven 'S's" is a major tradition of Nowruz. The haft sin table includes seven items specific starting with the letter S. The items symbolically correspond to seven creations and holy immortals protecting them. Traditionally, families attempt to set as beautiful a *Haft Sîn* table as they can (see above picture), as it is not only of traditional and spiritual value, but also noticed by visitors during Nowruz visitations and is a reflection of their good taste.



There are other traditions that take place before Nowruz arrives. The night before the last Wednesday of the year is called *Chahārshanbe Sūrī* (the festival fire). This festival celebrates the light (the good) winning out over the darkness (the bad). The tradition involves people going into the streets and alleys to make fires in order to jump over them while singing traditional songs. Any remaining evil and darkness will be exchanged by the light and good of the fire.

According to tradition, people are visited by the spirits of their ancestors on the last days of the year. Many children wrap themselves in shrouds, symbolically re-enacting the visits. They also run through the streets banging on pots and pans with spoons and knocking on doors to ask for treats. The ritual is called *qashogh-zany* (spoon beating) and symbolizes the beating out of the last unlucky Wednesday of the year.

There are also several other traditions on this night that involve getting rid of bad luck before the New Year begins. These rituals include *Kūze Shekastan*, the breaking of earthen jars which symbolically hold ones bad fortune; the ritual of *Fal-Gūsh*, or inferring one's future from the conversations of those passing by; and the ritual of *Gereh-goshā'ī*, making a knot in the corner of a handkerchief or garment and asking the first passerby to unravel it in order to remove ones misfortune.

Finally after the twelfth day of the festival, the thirteenth day of the festival is *Sizdah Bedar*. On this day people are expected to go out of doors. This is a day of festivity often accompanied by music and dancing, usually at family picnics. Hence Nowruz lasts twelve days and the thirteenth day represents the time of chaos when families put order aside and avoid the bad luck associated with the number thirteen by going outdoors and having picnics and parties.

Nowruz in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, Nowruz is celebrated throughout the country. It usually lasts for two weeks. In certain parts, such as in Mazar e Sharif, the festival is connected to the abundant red tulips that grow wild around the city and is called *Mēla-e Gul-e Surkh* (The Red Flower Festival). Traditionally Nowruz is a time when prizes and medals are bestowed on artists for their achievements and on farmers for their produce. The Festival of Farmers or *Jashni Dehqan* is celebrated during the first day of the New Year. On this day farmers walk in the cities as a sign of encouragement for agricultural productions.



Games called buzkashi are held in stadiums (see picture below) and picnics go on until late at night, with music and dancing in the parks and open grounds around shrines.



Unlike the Iranian Nowruz table that centers on the *Haft Sîn*, the Afghani Nowruz table is prepared according to *Haft Mēwa* (Seven Fruits). A fruit salad made from seven different dried fruits (raisins, dried fruits of the oleaster tree, pistachios, hazelnuts, prunes, apricots, and walnuts or almonds) is the centerpiece of the Afghani table.

Nowruz Celebrations by Kurds

The Kurds (an ethnic group considered to be indigenous to a region often referred to as Kurdistan, an area which includes parts of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey) celebrate Nowruz between the 18th and 21st of March. The word Nowruz is pronounced as “Newruz” by the Kurds. It is one of the few celebrations that has survived and predates all the major religious festivals.



To celebrate Kurds gather in open areas, mostly outside the cities, to welcome spring. Women wear gaily colored dresses and spangled head scarves and young men wave flags of green, yellow and red, the colors of the Kurdish people. They light fires and dance around them. The festival was illegal until 2000 in Turkey, where most of the Kurds live. Turkey now officially celebrates Nowruz as a spring holiday. Nowruz is however still considered as a potent symbol of Kurdish identity in Turkey.

Hala Festival

The Hala February festival is an annual event that takes place in Kuwait during the spring season. It is a month long celebration when the dry sands of the desert bloom into a green carpet covered with blossoming, colorful flora. During this time many migratory birds and seasonal animals also arrive in the area. The Hala Festival is a great opportunity for young and old alike to participate in this kaleidoscope of events featuring cultural festivals, parades, shopping carnivals, raffles and contests, concerts, and children's entertainment.

Georgian Keipi or Supra

Part of the social culture of the peoples of Georgia is a banquet feast called the keipi. In ancient times, a keipi feast would be held in the spring for the entire village to attend. The woman of the village would ensure that food was constantly replenished for the guests and a man called a *tamada*, or toastmaster, would give a toast. The tradition was that no one could drink their wine until the toastmaster had finished his toast. Today a keipi feast can be held at any time to celebrate special events. There may be over twenty toasts during one keipi. A tamada arranges breaks from time to time, because the toasts become long and special toasts require a ritual song or verse to accompany them. Oftentimes folk dances are also a part of the keipi celebration.

Basant, Jashan-e Baharaan, or Basant Panchami (Spring Festival)



Basant is another festival that takes place in the spring to celebrate the end of winter. In Pakistan and throughout Southern Asia, people of all religious backgrounds observe this spring tradition.

In some cities, like Lahore in Pakistan, the festival lasts for three days, but usually it is one a one day celebration. The Basant festival heralds the end of winter and arrival of spring. Traditionally people dress in bright green or yellow. Kite flying is

particularly important. Throughout the festival, kite flying competitions take place all over the city's rooftops.