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Marking the beginning of a new year, Nowruz traces its origins back to ancient Persia. Today, the holiday is widely celebrated across the Iranian diaspora—including these Iranian-Americans dancing at the 2016 Nowruz Festival in downtown Chicago.

PHOTOGRAPH BY HOSSEIN FATEMI, PANOS PICTURES/REDUX

HISTORY & CULTURE

This ancient festival is a celebration of springtime—and a brand new year

Nowruz, also known as Persian New Year, has been observed for more than 3,000 years as the victory of spring over darkness.

By Erin Blakemore
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For the Northern Hemisphere, March 20 is the first day of spring. But for 300 million people around the world, it's the beginning of a new year, too.

with the vernal equinox.

Nowruz has been celebrated in Iran and the Persian diaspora for more than 3,000 years. Its roots are as a feast day in **Zoroastrianism**, a religion practiced in ancient Persia that viewed the arrival of spring as a victory over darkness. The holiday survived the Islamic conquest of Persia in the seventh century and the decline of Zoroastrianism's popularity, and it spread across the globe through the **diaspora** of Persian people throughout history.

(*Here's how Persia became the world's first true empire.*)

What is Nowruz and how is it celebrated?

Traditionally celebrated on the vernal equinox, many begin preparations for Nowruz weeks in advance. In the leadup to the holiday, people perform ritual dances and fill vessels in their home with water, which is associated with health, in an attempt to banish bad luck.

On the last Wednesday before Nowruz, many celebrate Charshanbe Suri, a night in which they jump over fire or go to doors banging spoons to scare away bad luck. People also visit cemeteries and bring offerings for the dead, whom some believe visit before the spring rite begins.

The spring festival's focus is fertility and new life, so it's appropriate that many revelers celebrate with seeds and eggs. Households set up tables covered with seven symbolic items they call **haft-seen**. Haft means "seven" and "seen" is "s" in Farsi, and all of the items start with the letter.

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which is thought to spark love), garlic (protection), apple (fertility), sumac (love), vinegar (patience), and samanu, a pudding made of sprouted wheat (affluence). The table also can include a Koran, eggs, mirrors, and poetry.

Though Nowruz is old, the table tradition isn't: As A. Shapur Shahbazi notes in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, it only came into effect in the last century.



At Nowruz celebrations—like this one in Los Angeles, California—people jump over small fires to bring good luck in the new year.

PHOTOGRAPH BY LYNSEY ADDARIO, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION

Who celebrates Nowruz?

Nowruz has proven resilient in the modern era, too. After Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979, the new government attempted to suppress the festival out of fear it might detract from the state religion. But those attempts failed, and Nowruz is now celebrated as an official state holiday in Iran.

(*This ancient Persian empire once captured a Roman emperor.*)

It's also an official holiday in Afghanistan, Albania, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iraqi Kurdistan, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia's Bayan-Ölgii province, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, and it's widely celebrated in places like Turkey, India and other places with Persian enclaves.

In 2009, UNESCO, the cultural arm of the United Nations, listed the holiday on its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, noting that it "promotes values of peace and solidarity between generations and within families as well as reconciliation and neighborliness." March 21 is officially recognized as International Nowruz Day, though the holiday itself is celebrated between March 19 and 22, depending on calendars and vernal equinox calculations.

Editor's note: This story was originally published on March 19, 2020. It has been updated.

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