PERSSIAN NEW YEAR; NOWRUZ

Nowruz is pronounced no-rooz. It is the Persian New Year’s celebration. Nowruz comes from two Persian words. “Now” means new and “ruz” means day. The Persian New Year begins with the vernal equinox. That is the day when winter ends and spring begins. The vernal equinox is usually on March 20-21. In English, there are many different spellings, including Newroz, Noroz, Norouz, and Norooz. In this unit we use Nowruz.

Nowruz also celebrates the beginning of spring. Some Nowruz activities resemble those of other spring festivals such as Easter, or the Jewish holiday, Purim.

The Beginning of Nowruz

Nowruz has been celebrated for at least 3,000 years. It comes from traditions of the Zoroastrian religion. Zoroastrianism is an ancient Persian religion. Some Zoroastrian communities still exist. The largest are in the south of Iran, and in India.

Today, Nowruz is a secular holiday, not a religious holiday. This means that it is celebrated by people of different religions. Therefore it is celebrated differently by different groups of people, depending on their beliefs. In this unit, we describe the most common traditions.

Cultural Roots

Nowruz comes from the area called Persia, in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. Nowruz is an important celebration in the communities that have their roots in Persian-influenced areas.
Persia no longer exists as a country. Nowruz traditions live on in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan and Turkey. It is also celebrated by some people in Canada, the United States, some countries of Europe and other places.

**Rituals and Traditions**

The Nowruz season lasts 13 days. Nowruz celebrations can last between three days and a week. It depends on the country. In Iran they last four days. Children and university students get two weeks’ vacation from school.

People celebrate the end of one year and the start of a new one. Families and friends get together. Many adults do not work during the Nowruz season.

**Spring Cleaning**

Since Nowruz is a spring celebration, spring cleaning is an important Nowruz tradition.

The Persian expression for spring cleaning is *Khouneh Tekouni*. This means 'shaking the house'. Some people prepare for Nowruz by cleaning house before the season. This is also a traditional time to buy new clothes and new furniture.

**Fire Jumping**

Fire jumping is called *Chahar Shanbe Suri* in Persian. People do this at night on the last Wednesday before the New Year. Groups of people build small bonfires in the streets and jump over them. They shout “*Zardie man az to, sorkhie to az man*.” That is a Persian phrase. It means, “May my sickly pallor be yours and your red glow be mine.” People believe that jumping over the fire burns away the negative things that happened in the old year.

Of course, jumping over a fire is dangerous. Many people just light a fire and shout the phrase without getting close to the flames!
After fire jumping, people go home to their families. They wait for Tahvil. That is a Persian word for the exact moment when the vernal equinox happens. This is when the New Year begins.

**Haji Firooz**

In the past, there were no newspapers and no Internet. People did not know for certain exactly when Nowruz started. They depended on Haji Firooz. Haji Firooz came to each neighborhood to announce that Nowruz was coming.

Haji Firooz wears a red costume and his face is painted black. Black is a Persian symbol of good luck. He sings and dances in the streets with tambourines and trumpets, spreads good cheer and announces the coming New Year.

**Happy New Year!**

When the New Year is close, families and friends get together and wait for Tahvil. At the moment of tahvil, they wish each other well. They say “Happy New Year!” (“Sal-e No Mobarak!” in Persian). The eldest person in the family hands out special New Year’s sweets. Young children get coins. People visit neighbors and relatives. They exchange Nowruz gifts.

**The Table of the Seven S’s**

On the first day of Nowruz, families gather around the haft-seen table. The haft-seen table is very important for Nowruz celebrations. Haft means seven in Persian. Seen is Persian for the letter S. The haft-seen table is a table of seven things that start with the letter S.

**Nowruz Visits**

Paying visits is an important Nowruz tradition. People visit the homes of friends, neighbors, and relatives. They share food and chat. Everyone has to visit many people, so visits are short.

At Nowruz, people serve their visitors cookies, pastry, special nuts and fresh and dried fruit. Young people visit their elders first. Then the older people return the visits.
Colored Eggs

Easter is not the only spring holiday with the tradition of coloring eggs. Eggs are a symbol of the new life of spring in many cultures. Decorated eggs are a feature of Nowruz.

Special foods

Eggs are not the only special foods for Nowruz. One Nowruz specialty is a noodle soup called ash-e resteh. It is often served on the first day of Nowruz. The noodles symbolize life’s possibilities. People say untangling the noodles brings good luck.

Reshteh polo is rice cooked with noodles. People say it brings success in life.

Another special Nowruz food is fish with rice made with green herbs. It is called sabzi pollo mahi. The green herbs in the rice symbolize springtime.

Some people serve Kookoo sabzi for dinner at New Year. It is a fluffy omelet-like dish made with herbs and vegetables. They are mixed with eggs and walnuts.

Sweets are popular at Nowruz. There are cookies made from rice flour, called naan berengi. People eat baqlava, a sweet, flaky pastry. Sugar-coated almonds are called noghi. The sprouted wheat pudding from the haft-seen table, samanu, is also popular.

Sizdeh Bedar

Nowruz lasts thirteen days. The thirteenth day of Nowruz is called Sizdah Bedar. In Persian, Sizdah Bedar means “getting rid of the thirteenth”.

The thirteenth day of Nowruz symbolizes chaos and bad luck. Families go outdoors. They have picnics to avoid the bad luck some people connect with the number thirteen.

Sizdah Bedar is a festive day. Parks are full of families eating special foods at picnics. People dance, eat, and sing. They bring sabzeh, the sprouted wheat grass, barley, or lentils, from the haft-seen table. The sabzeh sprouts are thrown into a river, to carry away misfortune and sickness.

After Sizdeh Bedar, Nowruz is over. Adults go back to work. Children go back to school.
Choose the best answer for each question on this page

1. What does Nowruz celebrate?
   a. Persian independence
   b. The birth of Zoroaster
   c. Persian New Year
   d. Vernal equinox

2. When is Nowruz usually celebrated?
   a. In March
   b. In May
   c. In September
   d. In December

3. How old is Nowruz?
   a. 3,000 years
   b. 75 years
   c. 13 days
   d. The article does not say

4. Nowruz is a(n) ... celebration.
   a. Iranian
   b. Persian
   c. European
   d. None of the above

5. Nowruz is a celebration of which modern religion?
   a. Zoroastrianism
   b. Islam
   c. Christianity
   d. None

6. Who is Haji Firooz?
   a. The inventor of Nowruz
   b. A famous Persian poet
   c. A person who announces Tahvil
   d. A person who builds bonfires
Write complete sentences to answer the questions below

1. Do you think it is right for people to celebrate Nowruz in your country? Why or why not?

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____________________________________________________
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2. What part of the Nowruz article reminds you of a holiday you and your family celebrate? Describe.

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3. After reading the story what do you think is meant by symbolize?

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4. What did you learn about the way Nowruz is celebrated that you did not know? How will you use that new information?

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Glossary of Nowruz Vocabulary – Page 1

Ash-e resteh - Noodle soup. Traditional Nowruz food

Baqlava - Sweet, flaky pastry

Chahar Shanbe Suri - Fire-jumping (traditional Nowruz activity)

Equinox - One of two times in the year when day and night are about the same length. Vernal equinox is the beginning of spring. Autumnal equinox is the beginning of fall.

Haft-seen table - “Table of the seven S’s”. A Nowruz tradition

Haji Firooz - A colorful figure who says when the New Year is coming.

India - Ancient country, still in existence in the Middle East/Southwest Asia. Located on part of the site of the ancient Persian empire.

Iran - Modern country in the Middle East/Southwest Asia. Located on part of the site of the ancient Persian empire.

Khounneh Tekouni - spring cleaning

Naan berengi - Rice flour cookies. Traditional Nowruz food

Noghi - Sugar-coated almonds. Traditional Nowruz food

Nowruz - Persian New Year celebration. Celebrated in countries throughout the Middle East, Southwest and Central Asia and elsewhere

Persia - Ancient empire in Southwest Asia. The name comes from the Ancient Greek word Pars, which meant the area between the Indus Valley and the Nile River.

Pollo mahi - Fish with rice cooked with green herbs. Traditional Nowruz food

Qu’ran - The holy book of Islam. Also spelled Koran.
Glossary of Nowruz Vocabulary – Page 2

_Sal-e No Mobarak!_ - “Happy New Year!” in Persian

Sabzeh - Grass of sprouted wheat, lentils or barley. Traditional item on the haft-seen table.

Samanu - Sweet, creamy pudding made from sprouted wheat. Traditional item on the haft-seen table.

Seeb - Apples. Traditional item on the haft-seen table.

Senjed - Sweet, dry fruit of the lotus tree. Traditional item on the haft-seen table.

Serkeh - Vinegar. Traditional item on the haft-seen table.

Seer - Garlic. Traditional item on the haft-seen table.

Shahnameh - Epic Persian story. Sometimes put on the haft-seen table.

Shams ud-Din Hafez - 14th-century Persian poet. His poems are sometimes put on the haft-seen table.

Sizdah Bedar - The 13th (and last) day of Nowruz.

Somaq - Crushed spice made of sumac berries. Traditional item on the haft-seen table.

Sumerian - Ancient civilization in the area (roughly) of modern-day Iraq.

Tahvil - The moment of the vernal equinox, and beginning of Nowruz

_Zardie man az to, sorkhie to az man._ - Persian expression. It means, “May my sickly pallor be yours and your red glow be mine.” Shouted when jumping over a bonfire (Chahar shanbe suri).

Zoroaster - Persian prophet who founded Zoroastrianism. Also called Zarathustra.
Answers to *NOWRUZ*

**Multiple-choice questions**
1. c
2. a
3. a
4. b
5. d
6. c

**Short-answer**
1. Answers will vary. Accept reasonable answers.
2. *symbolize* = represent, stand for, mean
3. Answers will vary. Accept reasonable answers.