

Ancient cross-cultural peacebuilding experience in tense Middle East



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EXCLUSIVE PERSPECTIVE

Nowruz, the ancient celebration marking the arrival of spring, transcends being merely a historical tradition within Iran's cultural sphere. It presents a golden opportunity for fostering intercultural dialogue and promoting peace and stability in the perpetually turbulent Middle East. This ancient festival, with roots dating back 3,000 years, is deeply intertwined with the history and culture of various nations. Under a unified reign, it once fostered the most advanced form of human civilization, emphasizing coexistence,

peace, and hope for a brighter future.

To better understand this claim, it's essential to note that during ancient times, the Achaemenid Empire, which ruled over a vast swath of the world for over 200 years, embraced a wide diversity of peoples and cultures. Educated estimates suggest that over 100 nations, with different languages, customs, and religions, coexisted peacefully within the empire's expansive borders.

Historical records attest that the Achaemenids, by adopting a policy based on tolerance and respect towards diverse societies and cultures under their dominion, effectively established one of the most stable periods in Middle Eastern history. They allowed various ethnic groups to speak their own languages, practice their own religions, and adhere to their own customs.

It's important to note that the Middle East has been the cradle of various civilizations since the dawn of history, fostering its unparalleled diversity in ethnicity, religion, and culture. However, in the absence of policies promoting peaceful coexistence, this diversity has often provided fertile ground for security challenges, both internally and internationally.

Consequently, the Achaemenids, within the framework of their strategic national security policy aimed at preserving and promoting peace and stability across their empire and preventing the emergence of costly internal security threats, established celebrations and rituals that were revered and respected among all communities and cultures residing within their dominion. By emphasizing common values among all societies and cultures in the design of these celebrations and rituals, they gained appeal and respect among all communities and cultures residing within their dominion. Indeed, no culture or society in the past few centuries has confronted these celebrations and rituals with hostility; rather, they have all embraced

them with open arms.

Undoubtedly, one of the most significant examples of these celebrations is Nowruz, an ancient festival that, despite lacking Islamic origins, garnered respect and reverence, as Islam regards its customs and traditions as correct and godly. For example, in the famous letter of Imam Ali (PBUH), the first Shia Imam, to Malik al-Ashtar in Nahj al-Balagha, it is stated: "Do not violate the accepted customs that the subjects of this Islamic nation observe, have been attached to, and have been rectified by."

The renowned Islamic scholar Allama Muhammad Baqir Majlisi recounts that a group from Iran who had recently converted to Islam brought a silver cup filled with sweets as a gift for Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) during one of the Nowruz celebrations. He asked, "What is this?" They replied, "Today is Nowruz, the great Iranian festival." He said, "I wish every day was Nowruz for us."

Nowruz, which is considered to be one of the most lively and enduring ancient festivals, is celebrated and revered today from Mongolia in Central Asia to Albania in Eastern Europe and from India to Tatarstan in Russia.

Studying and reflecting on the cultural management experience of the Achaemenids reveals that wise management of cultural diversity and focus on the ancient Iranian civilization in cultural diplomacy could play a key role in preventing regional and international tensions, especially in the tension-prone

Middle East, which has been notorious for decades as a powder keg. Since Nowruz is a common celebration among all nations living under the Iranian civilization, it can be used to solidify this regional identity among these communities. Moreover, due to its cultural functions such as paying attention to nature, respecting the elderly, and promoting forgiveness, Nowruz can contribute to the formation of a peaceful, calm, secure, happy, and cohesive region.

It is abundantly clear that revitalizing and developing this ancient experience in the present era, especially in modern forms such as cultural and public diplomacy, can be the key to preventing and resolving many conflicts and tensions in the Middle East. In other words, Nowruz, as a common tradition among different nations, provides an excellent platform for cultural exchange and fostering understanding among cultures. Sharing customs, foods, music, and other cultural elements associated with Nowruz can deepen mutual understanding between cultures and create bridges among diverse communities. Therefore, it is hoped that Nowruz and its diverse capacities will receive more attention and understanding from policymakers, especially the elites of countries that once comprised the ancient Iranian civilization. Subsequently, we can witness these countries more effectively harnessing the unparalleled capacities of Nowruz to promote peace and stability in the Middle East.

A culture of peace, global convergence

Nowruz belongs to Iranian civilization



The painting depicts several men waiting for the arrival of the first day of spring (Nowruz) in older days.

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EXCLUSIVE PERSPECTIVE

Nowruz holds a revered position in Iranian culture and Persian literature as it dates back to the third to fourth centuries CE, which coincides with the national literary renaissance, especially during the Samanid period. Persian-speaking writers and poets, aiming to revive the Iranian identity, authored works that celebrated Nowruz as a national festival. Luminaries such as Ferdowsi, Rudaki, Unsuri, Manuchehri, Farrukhi, Beyhaqi, Avicenna, Khayyam, and others paid tribute to Nowruz as a celebration deeply rooted in Iranian mythological history.

Ancient Aryans recognized two seasons, warm and cold, each marked by celebrations. Beyond Iran, we find the observance of festivals and rituals at the onset of spring in regions such as Anatolia and Greece, but the grand, collective celebration of this festival within governmental institutions and non-governmental organizations and among all social strata is a distinct characteristic of the Iranian plateau. Despite all the ups and downs in the history of this land, including wars and various political, social, and cultural transformations, Nowruz has persisted from ancient times and has even found its way into other societies and cultures.

Nowruz was celebrated with special ceremonies in the courts of the Achaemenid and Sassanian kings. Representatives from 23 countries that had relations with Iran would attend the Iranian kings' court and present gifts from their respective governments. Abu Rayhan al-Biruni mentioned in his book *Al-Tafhim* that this celebration was attributed to Jamshid. He notes that Nowruz was significant and revered even before Jamshid made it grand. Roman Ghirshman, a French archaeologist, wrote about the Nowruz ceremony in the Achaemenid court, stating that everything in Persepolis was organized to celebrate this national festival.

Evidence of Nowruz ceremonies during the Umayyad era is scarce, but during the Abbasid era, caliphs occasionally welcomed the observance of Nowruz if it meant accepting people's gifts. With the rise of Abu Muslim Khorasani, the influential Barmakids, and Samanid and Buyid dynasties, Iranian celebrations flourished anew each time. Existing evidence suggests that Nowruz celebrations have been ongoing from one era to another since the advent of Islam, despite undergoing

some changes.

The region where Nowruz celebrations were held now includes many countries. So far, 54 countries celebrate Nowruz. Some of the Nowruz rituals in these countries differ from one another. The geography of Nowruz spans Iran, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Tibet, China, Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, a part of Yemen, Oman, the UAE, Kuwait, Egypt, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, the Balkans, part of Sudan, Zanzibar, Turkey, the entire Caucasus to Astrakhan, and more.

In 1925 AD, the solar calendar was officially adopted in Iran. The previous accurate calculation was for the large part respected, and instead of adding five days to the year, the first six months of the year since then have 31 days, the second six months have 30 days, and the last month of Esfand has 29 days, with an additional day every four years. A year with 31 days in Esfand was called a leap year. In the Iranian Constitution, the basis for calculating the year is solar, and the lunar year is also emphasized alongside it as the religious calendar.

Nowruz has been registered as a celebration with Iranian roots, dating back more than 3,000 years. Today, close to 400 million people celebrate it. The first World Nowruz Celebration was held on March 28, 2010, in Tehran, and the city of Tehran was recognized as the "World Nowruz Secretariat".

On March 30, 2009, the Parliament of Canada officially designated the first day of spring each year as Nowruz Day, the national holiday of Iranians and many other ethnic groups. On February 24, 2010, the United Nations General Assembly officially recognized March 21 as the International Day of Nowruz within the framework of the culture of peace.



A bas-relief at the Apadana, Persepolis, Iran, depicting Armenians bringing gifts to the Achaemenid king.

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