

**Case Study Report: Iran
Nowrouz and the Iranian Governments**

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Background

Nowrouz is one of the oldest celebrations throughout the world and has been carried out through millennia in and from the ancient Mesopotamia to the present Iran and most parts of central Asia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and north India. As you see, it covers a very vast area that includes at least ten countries, of which five celebrate it officially and five others have communities that carry out Nowrouz Festivals annually. Therefore, nomination of Nowrouz as an element of ICH for the UNESCO World Heritage List, throughout such a vast area, makes it a very big transnational file that, among 90 elements of the World Heritage List, becomes the biggest file in terms of the number of Member States nominating it as well as the geographical area it covers, not counting emigrants from the said Member States who live in other parts of the world but celebrate it annually.

It's highly worthy of attention that the preparation of such a file needed much of endeavours, co-operation and collaboration among the Member States and they did truly their best in this regard and succeeded in preparing and submitting it to UNESCO.

Now speaking that the Nowrouz Transnational Nomination File has been inscribed in the World Heritage List of the UNESCO, we, as a Member State that took part in this nomination file, would like to express our warmest congratulations to our partners who shared and contributed in this File. Such a file helped us to become closer to our neighbouring countries, contributed and enhanced our friendships, brotherhood and peace that are the cores of UNESCO's purposes as well. Moreover, it should be said that the Nowrouz file made us invent new methods of preparing nomination files for UNESCO. I mean, according to UNESCO procedures, we should have obtained the holders' and/or practitioners' consent through their signatures, but as such a huge event was not limited to some small communities, it was impossible to do it, therefore a new method was invented and administered. We announced our purpose in large-circulating mass media such as TV programmes and newspapers, and asked people about their opinions. Not only did nobody reject the case, but also everybody was very enthusiastic and sensitive about it insofar that they wanted to hear about the inscription as soon as possible. UNESCO accepted our method as a new means for collection of practitioners' signatures.

Description

What is significant about the Iranian as well as the Central Asian civilisations is their continuity over time, in spite of a turbulent history over the millennia. This continuity is

most evident in the material life of the people, in their traditions, their arts, and their vernacular architecture. One of these traditions is the grand feast of Nowrouz, inherited from the ancient times and surrounded with fables, myths, beliefs and traditions. Although the passage of time has left its mark on many of the details, it has hardly altered its essence or destroyed its content.

Two weeks before Nowrouz, each household traditionally grows a plate of sprouts of wheat, barley or lentils as omens of a good harvest or as tokens of fruitfulness in the future.

This significant ritual is followed by the “Spring Cleaning”. From cellar to attic, from carpets to bedding, everything must be made as good as new. A new life is dawning and the house must be symbolically purified and thoroughly cleansed, just as people will wear new cloth to start the New Year.

Different dishes and pastries are also prepared prior to Nowrouz;

“Samanou” a sweet-tasting pastry is one of these pastries. Participation in the Cooking of “Samanou” is an important ritual of Nowrouz. It is a treasured desire by many people because it is believed that a wish made during the process of mixing the “Samanou” usually comes true.

At nightfall on Charshanbehsoori, which is the eve of the last Wednesday, a bonfire of brambles and other dry plants is lit. Men and women, the old and the young, leap over the flames. The light of the flames symbolises the Sun. By challenging the setting sun to shine more brightly and to compete with the fire, they urge it to throw off the winter torpor.

On the New Year’s Eve, fireworks are set off in the courtyard of the house or on the terrace. They symbolise the combat between dark, gloomy winter and bright, joyful spring; the victory of fire over darkness, a reenactment of the moment when the world of shadows is attacked by the world of light, the moment of Creation.

On day before Nowrouz, market places get crowded with people buying pastries, flowers and other items for the Nowrouz table.

In Zoroastrianism, the spirits of the ancestors called “Farvahar” are highly valued. It is generally believed that these spirits start paying visits to the living members of the family from five days before Nourouz. On the last evening, when the spirits are returning to heaven, the living members light a small fire on the roofs to brighten the way for the spirits and ask them to return next year.

Now, everything is ready for the Nowrouz Day.

The plate of seedlings, “Samanou” which symbolises holy food, coloured eggs, a bowl of water, pieces of bread, a holy book and a mirror, a symbol of clarity and light, are among the main components of the *Nowrouz Table*.

Waiting for the New Year to begin, the parents and other older people pray for a prosperous year and recite the Qur'an to bring blessings and happiness to the family. In the very first seconds of the New Year, sweets are eaten, their taste presaging a happy year.

In the morning, the children are given gold coins, cakes and hard-boiled eggs that have been painted, decorated and wrapped as gifts. They symbolise the renewal of the world and they are a pledge of fruitfulness.

The first thirteen days of the year are the time of rejoicing. Children think only of playing and adults of visiting each other. The real purpose of these joyful days is to rediscover an original state of purity and equality. Distances due to social rank are abolished. People visit everyone, the mighty and the humble. The period of mourning for those who died the previous year is ended. Everyone enjoys the same kind of food and recreations and wears brightly coloured new clothes. All the rites performed at this time look back to a lost paradise, the original earthly paradise in which the divine breath infuses humankind with a feeling of spiritual fraternity and equality.

Exceptional value

The variety of Nowrouz rituals, the facts that is celebrated among so many diverse cultures, communities and that it has survived the test of time show that Nowrouz is a remarkable example of existing human creative genius.

It reflects the pivotal role of the oral and intangible culture of people in promoting peace, tolerance, reconciliation and solidarity in societies. It strengthens human values, such as mercifulness, friendship and brotherhood among cities, nations and religions. It's the time when people exchange their dreams, thoughts and hopes. Last but not least, Nowrouz brings harmony between human beings and nature.

Danger of Extinction

Despite the invaluable ethical values it promotes, Nowrouz has been affected by the radical changes in terms of political and economical elements, social transformation, mass tourism, process of globalisation and rapid development of Information and Communication Technology. Its integrity, authenticity and values have also been challenged by misinterpretation and acculturation.

Procedure for the plan of action

The continuity of Nowrouz, which is deeply rooted in the people's cultural identity, depends on a better understanding of Nowrouz diverse traditions, appreciation of its authentic cultural values, and a high level of coordination among countries concerned.

During the Coordinating Meeting of the Countries Celebrating Nowrouz, held in Tehran from 6th to 9th August 2004, it was mentioned that due to the diversity of the ceremonies, the different levels of documentation and research activities in each country, the participants agreed to draft their own action plan. It was also decided that the Multi-national Action Plan would be prepared based on them.

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Revitalisation of Nowrouz traditions will be the foundation for future preservation of other intangible cultural heritage and cultural expressions and spaces.

(a) Title of the project:

Safeguarding and Promoting of Nowrouz

(b) The organization or body responsible for the implementation of the action plan:

The Anthropology Research Center is a part of the Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization, established in 1988. The centre's activities are done in the four following departments:

- The Social Anthropology Department
- The Ritual Anthropology Department
- The Ecological Anthropology Department
- The Traditional Arts Department

The main activities of the centre regarding safeguarding, and promoting Nowrouz are as follows:

- Conducting national research projects on the rites and rituals of Nowrouz.
- Organising the First Nowrouz Meeting, 1998, Tehran, Iran
- Organising the Second Nowrouz Meeting, 2001, Bam, Iran
- Organising the First Nowrouz Co-coordinating Meeting between countries celebrating Nowrouz
- Producing three items of audio-visual material (three documentaries and short films and three picture collections on Nowrouz
- Publishing several books and documents regarding Nowrouz

Besides, the Iranian governments conduct and have increasingly taken the following actions through recent decades as I just briefly enlisted:

- ① TV and Radio programmes especially on Nowrouz that are broadcast before Nowrouz till the 13th day of the Celebration such as Nowrouz programs, entertaining items including fun shows, movies and series and animations for children.
- ② The Leader's and President's Nowrouz messages that are broadcasted on TV and radio.
- ③ Special items that are published in newspapers, magazines and etc. as well as Nowrouz Edition of some magazines and newspapers.
- ④ Establishment of Nowrouz market before and during Nowrouz celebration by the government in order to facilitate much Nowrouz related stuff that the people need and/or consume during the celebration.
- ⑤ Besides Nowrouz markets, the Government and municipalities organise art exhibitions specifically focused on Nowrouz.
- ⑥ Moreover, they prepare safe firecrackers and supervise setting them off in previously announced spots in cities, such as squares or parks.
- ⑦ Municipalities begin to decorate and beautify the appearance of towns and cities several days before the celebration to share their contributions in the Event.

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- ⑧ Municipalities assist in street performing plays like “Sīyāh-bāzī” that are exclusively about Nowrouz.
- ⑨ Many governmental organisations send their Nowrouz congratulations messages through Short Message Services (SMS) and/or postal cards to people.
- ⑩ All public and private institutions, companies and organisations allocate an annual budget specifically known as Nowrouz bonus (in Persian called “Eidi”) for their employees.
- ⑪ Allocation of a 13-day vacation for educational organisations, schools and universities and a 5-day vacation for governmental organizations, companies and etc. show the extent of Nowrouz’s significance and the time allocated for the celebration.
- ⑫ Ministry of Education puts relevant materials in textbooks to familiarise children with the Big Event.
- ⑬ Ministry of Higher Education and Universities both governmental and private ones organise national and international conferences on Nowrouz and their students prepare research papers or treatises on this particular subject or highly relevant topics.
- ⑭ The Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization tries to prepare facilities for Nowrouz trips as much as possible; for example, issuing electronic cards for public employees to benefit from the governmental facilities during the Nowrouz vacation.
- ⑮ Ministry of Health provides hundreds of emergency units across the intercity roads.
- ⑯ The Ministry of Roads and Transportation not only increases the number of public vehicles such as buses, vans, trains and airplanes, but also supervises the system in collaboration of Police forces across the roads, highways, and etc. to minimise the road casualties throughout the country.

And finally, Iran has been nominated for establishment of a Category 2 UNESCO Center for Regional Research for Safeguarding of ICH in the Central and Western Asia. Through this centre, we hope to find new ways and methods to safeguard, preserve and promote elements of the ICH across the region as well as collaborations with other similar centres throughout the world.