

The Enduring Flame: A History of Kurdish Newroz

I. Introduction: Nowruz and the Kurdish New Day

A. Nowruz: A Transcultural Vernal Equinox Celebration

Nowruz, a festival whose name resonates with the concept of a "new day," marks the vernal equinox and the advent of spring, typically occurring on March 20th or 21st.¹ This ancient celebration, with origins stretching back over three millennia, predates many contemporary religious and national constructs, signifying a profound connection to the cyclical rhythms of nature.¹ It is observed by more than 300 million people across a vast geographical expanse, encompassing diverse cultures in Iran, Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Balkans, and beyond.¹ The widespread nature of Nowruz highlights shared historical and cultural legacies, many of which were disseminated along ancient thoroughfares such as the Silk Road.³ Recognizing its deep cultural importance, UNESCO inscribed Nowruz on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009, a designation extended in 2016. Furthermore, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed March 21st as International Nowruz Day in 2010.¹ This global acknowledgment underscores the festival's universal themes of renewal, peace, unity, and cultural diversity.

B. Kurdish Newroz: A Distinctive Emblem of Identity and Freedom

For the Kurdish people, this ancient festival is specifically known as Newroz (نەورۆز), a term whose usage and orthography carry significant cultural and political weight.⁵ The preference for the spelling "Newroz," as opposed to "Nowruz" or state-imposed variations such as "Nevruz" in Turkey, is not merely a linguistic nuance. Instead, it often represents a deliberate act of cultural assertion and a reclamation of heritage, particularly in contexts where Kurdish identity has faced assimilationist pressures.⁶ This conscious linguistic choice serves as a subtle yet powerful demarcation of their distinct cultural space.

While sharing common historical roots with other Nowruz traditions, Kurdish Newroz is uniquely characterized by the foundational legend of Kawa the Blacksmith (Kawayê Hesinkar). This narrative recounts Kawa's heroic victory over the despotic king Zahhak (referred to as Zohak or Dehaq in various accounts), an event that symbolizes liberation from oppression and the dawn of freedom for the Kurdish people.⁶ This mythological underpinning is central to the meaning and observance of Newroz for Kurds, distinguishing it from interpretations prevalent in other cultures. Consequently, Newroz is widely regarded as the most significant festival in Kurdish culture. It functions as a potent unifying force, drawing together Kurds across diverse political affiliations, cultural expressions, and dialectal variations.⁵ More than just a New Year celebration, Newroz embodies new beginnings and serves as an annual opportunity to affirm

and support the Kurdish cause.⁵

The international recognition of Nowruz by bodies like UNESCO and the UN, while primarily celebrating universal themes of peace and shared heritage, inadvertently provides a platform.¹ This global stage allows the specific cultural expressions and the often-politicized narratives associated with Kurdish Newroz to gain broader visibility. Even as official recognitions may tend to generalize diverse practices, the very act of celebrating Newroz becomes, for many Kurds, a statement about their unique history and ongoing struggles. Thus, the universal celebration can be, and often is, leveraged by Kurdish communities to highlight their particular story and the challenges they encounter in preserving their distinct cultural identity.

C. Aim and Structure of the Report

This report aims to provide a comprehensive historical analysis of Kurdish Newroz. It will delve into its ancient origins, explore the pivotal mythology of Kawa the Blacksmith, detail traditional customs and rituals, examine its representation in Kurdish literature, and analyze its profound socio-political significance as a cornerstone of Kurdish identity and a symbol of resistance. Drawing upon a diverse range of sources, this report will illuminate the multifaceted nature of this ancient and enduring celebration, tracing its evolution and its unwavering importance to the Kurdish people.

II. Ancient Echoes: Tracing the Origins of Newroz

A. Mesopotamian and Ancient Iranian Roots

The origins of Newroz are embedded in deep antiquity, with scholarly investigations pointing to connections with pre-Zoroastrian societies and early agricultural communities in Mesopotamia and the wider Iranian plateau.² Some Kurdish academics, notably Professor Mawlud Ibrahim Hassan, propose a link between Newroz and the Sumerian New Year, specifically the resurrection of the deity Dumuzi. This interpretation dates the earliest forms of such celebrations to as far back as 10,000 BCE, aligning with the emergence of agriculture and emphasizing a foundational tie to the cycles of nature and agricultural renewal.⁹ The festival was likely integrated into Zoroastrianism from its inception in the late second or early first millennium BCE.¹ Within Zoroastrian theology, Newroz marked one of the most sacred days of the year, symbolizing the triumph of good over evil and light over darkness, embodied by the return of spring.¹ The Zoroastrian divine being Rapithwin, the personification of summer and noon, is said to return with the spring at noon on Nowruz, heralding warmth and abundance.² Beyond Zoroastrianism, many historians also suggest that Newroz traditions were transmitted to the Kurdish people through the tenets and practices of the religion of Mithras.⁹ However, an alternative perspective advanced by some researchers posits that Newroz originates purely from the observation of nature's renewal, independent of specific religious doctrines.⁹ This multiplicity of origin theories suggests that Newroz is likely a syncretic festival. Rather than having a single, linear point of origin, it appears to have absorbed and integrated elements from various ancient belief systems and indigenous practices over millennia. This syncretic nature, its capacity to incorporate and reflect different

influences, is a key factor in its remarkable resilience and adaptability across diverse cultural and religious epochs, from early nature-based observances to later formalizations within organized religions like Zoroastrianism and Mithraism, and even its continued observance within Islamic cultural contexts.²

B. Etymology and Core Symbolism: The "New Day"

The term "Newroz," as used in Kurdish (نەورۆز), is a direct translation of "New Day," derived from the Kurdish words *nû* (new) and *roj* (day).¹⁰ This etymology is cognate with the Persian "Nowruz," from *nō* (new) and *rūz* (day).¹ Phonetic variations, such as the interchangeability of z, c, and j sounds in Aryan languages, account for slight differences in pronunciation and transliteration across related linguistic groups.¹¹

The fundamental symbolism of Newroz revolves around the renewal of nature, the rebirth of life following the dormancy of winter, and the ascendance of light (spring) over darkness (winter).¹ This aligns perfectly with the astronomical event of the vernal equinox, a time when daylight and darkness are of nearly equal duration, symbolizing balance and a fresh beginning.¹² For the Kurdish people, this concept of renewal extends beyond the natural world to encompass social and political dimensions, representing hope, the aspiration for freedom, and the anticipation of a prosperous and just future.⁸ The debate over whether Newroz was primarily religious or secular in its most ancient forms is perhaps less critical than its consistent and enduring function as a marker of cyclical renewal. This foundational theme—be it natural, spiritual, or social—serves as the common thread that has allowed the festival to transcend specific doctrinal shifts and maintain its profound relevance throughout history.

C. Historical Mentions and Evolution

While explicit references to Newroz in the earliest Zoroastrian texts are limited, the celebration of the festival is clearly described in Persian textual sources dating from the Parthian Empire (247 BCE–224 CE) and, more extensively, during the Sasanian era (224–651 CE).² Indeed, Pahlavi texts from the Sasanian period provide the first unambiguous written mention of the festival as "*nōg rōz*".² Some scholarly interpretations suggest that intricate bas-reliefs at the Achaemenian capital of Persepolis (c. 559–330 BCE) may depict Nowruz festivities, including tributes to the king, though this remains a subject of ongoing academic discussion.²

Following the Arab Muslim conquest of Persia in the 7th century CE, Newroz demonstrated remarkable persistence. It continued as a significant civil holiday marking the New Year among the local populations, including those in regions inhabited by Kurds. Various Islamic dynasties that subsequently ruled the region, such as the Samanids and Buyids, as well as later Turkic and Mongol rulers, also observed and, in some cases, patronized the festival, contributing to its spread throughout Central Asia.² Esteemed Muslim scholars of the medieval period, including Abu Rayhan al-Bīrūnī and Omar Khayyam, not only documented the customs of Nowruz but also engaged in astronomical calculations to refine its precise timing, underscoring its continued importance in the cultural and scientific life of the era.²

III. The Legend of Kawa: Freedom's Flame in Kurdish Lore

A. The Tyranny of Zahhak (Zohak/Dehaq)

The mythological narrative that forms the bedrock of Kurdish Newroz is the epic tale of Kawa the Blacksmith (Kawayê Hesinkar) and his stand against the tyrannical king Zahhak, also known by variations such as Zuhak in Kurdish or Dehaq.⁶ Zahhak is frequently depicted as a foreign oppressor, sometimes identified as an Assyrian king, whose malevolent rule cast a dark shadow over the land.⁶ A defining feature of his terrifying image is the presence of serpents growing from his shoulders, a consequence, according to some versions of the legend, of a pact made with Ahriman, the embodiment of Evil.⁶

To soothe the excruciating pain inflicted by these serpents, or, in other accounts, to nourish them, Zahhak decreed a horrific daily sacrifice: two young people were to be slain, their brains then fed to the monstrous appendages.⁶ This brutal reign of terror was so profound that it was said to have caused spring itself to abandon Kurdistan, plunging the land into a perpetual state of despair and fear.⁶ The identity of this tyrant figure, whether Assyrian in Kurdish lore or Arab as in Ferdowsi's Persian epic *Shahnameh*, demonstrates a notable flexibility. This adaptability allows the "oppressor" in the myth to be mapped onto various historical adversaries or dominant powers, depending on the cultural context of the retelling. For Kurds, identifying Zahhak as Assyrian resonates with ancient historical conflicts and narratives of resistance against imperial domination emanating from Mesopotamia, thereby reinforcing a deep-seated historical memory of struggle and resilience.

B. Kawa's Resistance and the Birth of a People

Amidst this reign of terror, a flicker of compassion and defiance emerged. A cook in Zahhak's palace, or in some versions, the individual tasked with overseeing the daily sacrifices, began a courageous subterfuge. Each day, this person would spare the life of one of the condemned youths, substituting a sheep's brain for one of the human brains destined for the serpents. The young people thus saved were secretly guided away to the safety of the remote mountains. Crucially, these rescued youths are, according to Kurdish tradition, considered the very ancestors of the Kurdish people. This specific articulation within Kurdish lore transforms a general myth of liberation into a powerful ethno-genetic narrative, directly linking the act of resistance against tyranny to the genesis and identity of the Kurdish nation. Newroz, therefore, becomes not merely a New Year celebration but an annual reaffirmation of their origins, which are perceived as being intrinsically rooted in the struggle for freedom. The catalyst for open rebellion was Kawa, a humble blacksmith who had endured the unimaginable grief of losing several of his own children to Zahhak's insatiable cruelty—sources vary on the number, citing seven sons, two children, or six sons. When faced with the demand to sacrifice his last remaining child (a daughter in some accounts), Kawa's endurance reached its limit, and he resolved to fight back.

Kawa then orchestrated an uprising. Some versions of the legend describe him rallying the youths who had been saved in the mountains, training them into a formidable army. Leading this force, Kawa stormed Zahhak's stronghold and, in a climactic confrontation, slew the tyrant, often depicted as using his blacksmith's hammer as the instrument of justice. To signal this momentous victory and to summon his supporters from afar, Kawa ascended a mountainside and ignited a great bonfire. The very next day, which was March 21st, spring is said to have returned to Kurdistan, bringing with it light, warmth, and renewal. This act of lighting fires on the mountains became the quintessential symbol of Newroz for the Kurdish people, an emblem of their hard-won freedom.

C. Symbolism: Liberation, Courage, and the Primacy of Fire

The legend of Kawa the Blacksmith serves as a potent and enduring allegory for liberation from tyranny, celebrating the courage of ordinary individuals to rise against oppression, and embodying the collective struggle for freedom. The fire, so central to the narrative, is imbued with profound symbolism. Ignited by Kawa, it represents far more than a mere signal; it is an emblem of freedom itself, of purification, the definitive end of the darkness associated with Zahhak's oppressive rule and the harshness of winter, and the radiant dawn of a new era characterized by spring and liberty. This specific and deeply rooted emphasis on fire as a symbol of liberation distinguishes the Kurdish interpretation of Newroz from the more generalized fire rituals observed in other Nowruz traditions. While Kawa's blacksmith apron (known as *Derafsh Kaviani* in Persian tradition) is sometimes mentioned as a banner of the revolt, the image of the blazing bonfire on the mountaintop remains the preeminent and most evocative symbol of Newroz in Kurdish collective memory.

D. Comparison with Persian Narratives and Historical Texts

The story of Kawa and Zahhak is an ancient Iranian legend, finding one of its most famous literary expressions in the 10th-century Persian epic, the *Shahnameh* ("Book of Kings"), penned by the poet Ferdowsi. Beyond the *Shahnameh*, the tale is also recounted in other early historical and literary sources, including Dinawari's *General History* and Masudi's *The Meadows of Gold*. Significantly, the medieval Kurdish historian Sherefxan Bidlisi also included a version of this narrative in his seminal work, the *Sharafnameh*, a comprehensive history of the Kurdish people.

While Persian tradition acknowledges the Kawa and Zahhak story as part of its rich folklore, the primary mythological association for Nowruz in Persian culture is with the legendary King Jamshid (known as Yima in Avestan texts). Jamshid is credited with establishing civilization and, upon ascending a jewel-encrusted throne that rose into the sky, declaring that day the "new day" or Nowruz. For Persians, Jamshid typically symbolizes prosperity, righteous kingship, and the advent of a golden age. In contrast, for Kurds, Kawa embodies the spirit of popular revolt, resistance from below, and the ultimate triumph of the people over a tyrannical ruler.

It is noteworthy that some Kurdish scholars, such as Zainal Abedin Znar, have presented alternative interpretations. They argue that the direct linkage of the Kawa-Zahhak myth to the Newroz festival might be a later conflation, possibly influenced by what they term "invaders of

Kurdistan." According to this perspective, Kawa might have been a title for a Median governor, and his story, along with that of Zahhak, may be historically unrelated to the Newroz festival itself. These scholars often view Newroz as having older roots, tied more directly to the renewal of nature or to specific historical events such as the Median victory over the Assyrians in 612 BCE. This internal Kurdish scholarly debate highlights the complex interplay between historical research, folklore, and the construction of national identity. The popular narrative, deeply embedded and resonant, often becomes a more powerful socio-political reality than precise historical reconstructions, demonstrating that the "truth" of a myth can lie in its enduring capacity to articulate collective aspirations and identity.

Table 1: Key Figures and Texts in the Kawa-Zahhak Narrative

Figure/Text	Description/Role in Kurdish Newroz Context	Key Snippet References
Kawa (Kawayê Hesinkar)	The blacksmith hero who leads the revolt against Zahhak, kills him, and lights the bonfire symbolizing freedom and Newroz. Considered an ancestral figure by Kurds.	
Zahhak (Zohak/Dehaq)	The tyrannical king with serpents on his shoulders, demanding daily sacrifices of youths. His overthrow by Kawa is central to the Newroz legend. Often seen as Assyrian.	
Fereydun	In Persian versions of the legend (e.g., <i>Shahnameh</i>), a prince of the royal dynasty who, with Kawa's help, overthrows Zahhak and becomes king. Less central in Kurdish focus.	
Shahnameh (Ferdowsi)	10th-century Persian epic poem that contains a prominent version of the Kawa and Zahhak story. A key textual source for the broader Iranian myth.	
Sharafnameh (Sherefخان Bidlisi)	16th-century historical work by 6 a Kurdish historian that retells the Kawa and Zahhak legend,	

	embedding it within Kurdish historiography.	
Dinawari (<i>General History</i>)	Early Islamic-era historian whose work includes a version of the ancient Iranian legends, including elements related to the Zahhak story.	6
Masudi (<i>The Meadows of Gold</i>)	Early Islamic-era historian and geographer who also recounted ancient Iranian myths, contributing to the textual record of the Zahhak narrative.	6

IV. Celebrating Newroz: Kurdish Customs and Rituals

A. The Eve of Newroz: The Sacred Bonfire

The lighting of bonfires on the eve of Newroz, March 20th, stands as the paramount symbol and a central, sacred ritual of the Kurdish celebration. This practice is particularly prominent and deeply ingrained in the traditions of southern Kurdistan (Bashur, or Iraqi Kurdistan) and eastern Kurdistan (Rojhilat, or Iranian Kurdistan). These fires are not merely celebratory; they are a direct commemoration of Kawa the Blacksmith's historic act of igniting a beacon on the mountainside to signal his victory over Zahhak and the dawn of freedom for his people. Symbolically, the bonfires represent the definitive passing of winter's darkness and oppressive cold, and the joyous arrival of spring's light, warmth, and the promise of renewal.

A common and significant tradition associated with these bonfires is the act of jumping over the flames. This ritual is widely understood as an act of purification, a symbolic shedding of the misfortunes and negative energies of the past year, and a courageous step into the new year with renewed vigor and hope. While this practice of leaping over fires is also observed in broader Nowruz celebrations across various cultures, its direct linkage to Kawa's specific act of liberation imbues it with a unique and potent layer of meaning within the Kurdish context.

B. Traditional Practices: A Tapestry of Joy and Community

Kurdish Newroz is characterized by a rich array of customs that emphasize communal joy, cultural expression, and social solidarity.

1. Communal Gatherings, Music, and Folk Dances:

Newroz is inherently a communal festival, a time when people congregate in large numbers, often in the scenic countryside, public squares, or traditional gathering places, to celebrate collectively. Picnics, known as 'seyran,' are a particularly cherished aspect of the festivities, especially on the days immediately following Newroz Eve, allowing families and communities to enjoy the burgeoning spring landscape together.

Music is an indispensable element of the celebration, with traditional Kurdish songs (stranên

Kurdî) filling the air, performed by community members and, in contemporary times, by professional musicians who play a vital role in modern Newroz events. Folk dances are perhaps the most vibrant and participatory expression of Newroz joy. Men and women frequently dance together, forming circles, semi-circles, or lines, their hands linked or pinkies interlaced, moving in synchronized patterns that embody unity and shared cultural heritage. Common Kurdish dance forms include Govend (the Kurmanji Kurdish equivalent of the Turkish Halay), Dîlan, and Çopî (a Sorani Kurdish term for dance). Specific dances often performed during Newroz include Keçiko, Çepikli, Garzane, Papuri, Meyroke, Temilav, and Çeçeno from Kurmanji-speaking regions, and Gerdûn, Çepî, Khamîr Mirî, and Sêpêyî from Sorani-speaking areas. The Sheikhanî dance is also common in Behdînan (Kurmanji-speaking Iraqî Kurdistan) and among Kurdish Jews and Assyrians. The leader of these communal dances, who often directs the steps and rhythm, is known as the *sergovend* or *serçem* in Kurmanji, and *serçopî* in Sorani. The emphasis on these communal dances is not merely for entertainment; it serves as a powerful, embodied expression of unity and collective identity. The physical linking of dancers in traditional formations visually and experientially reinforces social cohesion, an aspect of particular importance for a people who have historically faced fragmentation and pressures against their collective cultural integrity. The dance, therefore, transcends mere festivity; it becomes a ritual enactment of "Kurdishness" and communal strength, echoing the collective action of Kawa and the people against Zahhak.

2. Traditional Kurdish Attire (Cil û bergên Kurdî):

A defining characteristic of Newroz celebrations is the widespread practice of wearing traditional Kurdish clothing, known as Cil û bergên Kurdî. This is a vibrant display of cultural pride and a visible assertion of identity. Men's attire exhibits regional variations (categorized generally as Northern, Central, and Southern Kurdish styles) but typically includes distinctive wide trousers (Şalwar, Dameh-Qapan, or Jafi), shirts, vests (Pastak), jackets, and elaborately tied waist sashes. The "Şal û Şapik" ensemble from Central Kurdistan is particularly well-recognized. Headgear, such as turbans (Kalagheh) or intricately patterned skullcaps, often completes the male attire.

Kurdish women's clothing is renowned for its dazzling array of bright colors, intricate embroidery, and flowing designs. Common elements include long dresses (*Kras*), often worn over baggy trousers (*Jafi*), and adorned with ornate vests or jackets (*Kolonjeh* or *Sukhmeh*) and decorative waist shawls. Luxurious fabrics such as chiffon, velvet, and brocades are frequently used, often embellished with sequins, beads, and traditional motifs. Headscarves are commonly worn, and in some regions, women may also wear decorated pillbox hats. In regions where Kurdish cultural expression has been suppressed, the act of donning traditional attire during Newroz can transform into a significant and courageous statement of identity and defiance.

3. Feasting and Traditional Foods:

Newroz is a time of joyous feasting, where families and communities come together to prepare and share special foods. Among the specific Kurdish dishes commonly associated with Newroz is Aprax or Dolma—vegetables such as peppers, tomatoes, aubergines, or grape leaves meticulously stuffed with a savory mixture of herbed aromatic rice, and sometimes minced meat. This dish is a staple at virtually all festive Kurdish events. Other dishes

mentioned in the context of a vegan Kurdish Newroz celebration include Kurdish Biryani, a flavorful mixed rice dish incorporating nuts, dried fruits, fried potatoes, and toasted vermicelli noodles, and Kutilk, which are bulgur dumplings often served in a sauce.

During outdoor Newroz gatherings, barbecued meats are a popular choice. Additionally, a variety of nuts, dried fruits (collectively known as Ajil), and traditional sweets are prepared and shared among family and friends, adding to the festive atmosphere.

It is important to note a distinction regarding the Haft Sin table, a central Nowruz tradition in Iranian culture involving the arrangement of seven symbolic items starting with the Persian letter 'S'. While this practice is paramount for Iranians, it is not historically a core component of traditional Kurdish Newroz celebrations. This relative absence of the Haft Sin tradition in mainstream Kurdish Newroz, compared to its centrality in Persian Nowruz, further highlights a distinct cultural trajectory. While both cultures share ancient Iranian roots, the symbolic focus of their principal spring festival has evolved along different paths. Kurds have prioritized the Kawa myth and the potent symbolism of fire, elements that resonate deeply with their historical narrative of liberation and resistance, rather than the more numerological and item-specific symbolism embodied by the Haft Sin. However, some sources indicate that Kurds bake *samani* (a sweet paste made from germinated wheat, which is one of the Haft Sin items) for a distinct festival known as *Kose Geldi*. This suggests certain shared ancient Iranian elements or regional variations, rather than a wholesale adoption of the Haft Sin ritual for Newroz itself.

4. Poetry Recitations, Storytelling, and Social Customs:

The cultural richness of Newroz is further enhanced by the recitation of poetry and the telling of stories, with the legend of Kawa the Blacksmith naturally taking center stage in oral traditions. Families often spend the day in the countryside, embracing the beauty of nature as it awakens in spring.

A crucial social dimension of Newroz involves visiting family members and friends, exchanging heartfelt good wishes for the new year, and, significantly, making efforts to resolve any conflicts or misunderstandings that may have arisen during the previous year. This practice underscores the theme of renewal as it applies to social bonds and community harmony. In some Kurdish regions, specific customs include giving children boiled and colorfully painted eggs, and the symbolic smashing of old pottery to usher in good luck and dispel misfortune.

C. The Kose Geldi / Kosa Garan Ritual: A Related Tradition?

The *Kose Geldi* (also referred to as Kosa Garan or Kosa Gêlî) tradition is documented as an ancient Kurdish custom that bears some relation to the New Year and the transition from winter to spring. This ritual is sometimes performed around the Newroz period, although one account suggests another form of it occurs at Christmas time, drawing parallels with the figure of Santa Claus.

The central figure in this tradition is Kosa, a man who dons a mask and a distinctive costume and travels from house to house within the community. As Kosa makes his rounds, households offer him gifts of food, such as wheat, bread, and sugar. This offering is made in the hope that it will bring increased blessings, abundance, and wealth to the home in the coming new year. Theatrical performances often depict Kosa and a figure representing his "bride," enacting a

story that may involve themes of abduction, conflict, and eventual reconciliation, symbolizing the restoration of order and harmony.

Notably, sources specifically mention that Kurds prepare and bake a *samani* cake (a sweet confection made from wheat germ) for the feast of Kose Geldi. This is significant because *samanu* or *samani* is a key symbolic item in the Persian Haft Sin tradition, representing abundance and strength. The Kose Geldi rituals appear to be intrinsically linked to the transition from winter to spring, with themes of warding off the harshness of winter and welcoming the fertility and bounty of the new season. These themes may predate or run parallel to Newroz celebrations, sharing some overlapping symbolism related to renewal and blessings. One source links the origins of Kosa Garan to Zoroastrianism and notes its particular sacredness for Yazidi Kurds, who associate it with the "Khedr Ilyas" celebration. The *Kose Geldi/Kosa Garan* festival, with its costumed figure, house visits, and collection of food for blessings, thus represents a distinct folk ritual. Its connection to *samani* might indicate an older, shared Iranian tradition related to wheat and fertility that became formalized into the Haft Sin in Persian culture but remained part of a separate folk play or ritual within Kurdish culture, highlighting a divergence in how common ancestral elements were incorporated into the primary New Year festivals of different Iranian peoples.

Table 2: Core Traditional Elements of Kurdish Newroz Celebrations

Element Category	Specific Kurdish Practices/Items	Symbolic Meaning/Significance	Key Snippet References
Bonfires	Lighting large fires on Newroz eve (March 20th); jumping over the flames.	Commemorates Kawa's victory signal; symbolizes freedom, end of winter/darkness, purification, renewal, light triumphing over darkness.	
Folk Dances	Communal dances like Govend, Dîlan, Çopî; specific dances (e.g., Keçiko, Sheikhani, Gerdûn, Sêpêyî); often in circles/lines, holding hands.	Expresses joy, unity, collective identity, social cohesion, cultural pride; enacts communal strength and solidarity.	
Traditional Attire (Cil û bergên Kurdî)	Men: Şalwar, Şal û Şapik, vests (Pastak), waist sashes, turbans. Women: Colorful Kras (dresses), Jafi (trousers), Kolonjeh (vests), elaborate	Assertion of Kurdish identity and cultural heritage; expression of pride; can be an act of defiance in contexts of suppression.	

	embroidery.		
Traditional Foods	Aprax/Dolma (stuffed vegetables/leaves), Kurdish Biryani, Kutilk (bulgur dumplings), barbecued meats, nuts, dried fruits (Ajil), sweets.	Celebratory feasting, sharing, abundance, hospitality; specific dishes carry cultural significance and are part of festive tradition.	
Social Customs	Picnics (Seyran) in the countryside, visiting family/friends, exchanging good wishes, resolving past conflicts, poetry recitation, storytelling (Kawa legend).	Renewal of social bonds, community harmony, connection with nature, transmission of cultural narratives and history, hope for the new year.	

V. Newroz in Kurdish Literary and Historical Record

A. Classical Kurdish Poetry and Newroz

Newroz has been a cherished and recurring theme in Kurdish literature for many centuries, with poets eloquently celebrating its profound cultural, symbolic, and national significance. The festival's imagery and meaning are deeply woven into the fabric of classical Kurdish poetic expression.

Melayê Cizîrî (also known as Mela Ahmed-i Jaziri, circa 1570–1640), a seminal figure who laid the foundations for much of Kurdish poetry, lauded Newroz in his works. He celebrated it as a day of "eternal light" and the auspicious arrival of the new year, a time "when a such light is rising". Cizîrî's poetry, which was significantly influenced by Sufism and the established forms of classical Persian verse, played a crucial role in establishing a sophisticated literary tradition in the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish.

Another towering figure in Kurdish literature, Ehmedê Xanî (1650–1706), also referenced the importance of Newroz. His epic masterpiece, *Mem û Zîn*, widely considered a cornerstone of Kurdish literary heritage, incorporates Newroz as a significant cultural backdrop. The celebrated love story of Mem and Zin often unfolds against the vivid tapestry of Kurdish life and customs, with Newroz celebrations marking key moments or the commencement of the narrative.

The 17th-century Kurdish poet Ahmad Khani (Ehmedê Xanî) is noted in one source for mentioning in his poems how people, both youth and elderly, would leave their houses and gather in the countryside to celebrate Newroz. Other poets, such as a later Mele-i Cizîrî (identified in one source as a 19th-century poet, though there might be some conflation with the earlier, more famous Melayê Cizîrî), also perceived Newroz as a powerful symbol of renewal and rebirth. Furthermore, Abdul Khaliq al-Athiri al-Kirkuki (1890–1962) penned a

renowned poem dedicated to Newroz, a work that encapsulates profound national and patriotic sentiments, reflecting the festival's enduring emotional resonance for the Kurdish people. The recurring appearance of Newroz in such foundational Kurdish literary works demonstrates that the festival was already deeply embedded in Kurdish cultural consciousness centuries before its more overt modern politicization. This rich literary heritage provided fertile ground for later nationalist interpretations, lending them historical legitimacy and profound cultural resonance, as it was an amplification of existing cultural DNA rather than an alien imposition.

B. Evolution and Scholarly Interpretations

While the myth of Kawa the Blacksmith is ancient, its specific and prominent association with Newroz was notably emphasized and popularized by the influential Kurdish poet and intellectual Taufik Abdullah, more widely known by his pen name Pîremêrd, during the 1930s. Pîremêrd consciously connected the existing myths of oppression and liberation, particularly the Kawa narrative, with the Newroz festival. This act was instrumental in reviving and re-contextualizing Newroz as a potent symbol of the Kurdish national struggle and a catalyst for cultural revival during a period of burgeoning Kurdish national consciousness. This conscious effort represents a classic example of what historian Eric Hobsbawm termed the "invention of tradition," wherein elements of folklore are selected, reinterpreted, and emphasized to serve modern needs of national identity formation. The "invention" in this context was not the creation of the myth itself, but its elevation and specific application as the primary ideological lens through which Kurdish Newroz came to be understood and celebrated in the modern era.

Parallel to these literary and cultural revivals, some Kurdish historians and researchers have sought to trace the Newroz date of March 21st back to a significant historical event: the Median victory over the Assyrian Empire and the subsequent demolition of Nineveh in 612 BCE. This interpretation links the "new day" of Newroz directly to this ancient liberation, thereby further historicizing the festival as a celebration of early Kurdish sovereignty and self-determination. The theory that the Medes are ancestors of the Kurds, notably advanced by the orientalist scholar Vladimir Minorsky , lends support to this Median-Newroz connection within the framework of Kurdish identity.

However, as discussed previously (Section III.D), there exist alternative perspectives within Kurdish scholarship. Some academics, like Zainal Abedin Znar , propose that the direct linkage of Kawa, Zahhak, and Newroz is a later conflation. They argue that Newroz's authentic roots are older and more intrinsically tied to the cycles of nature or, alternatively, to the Median victory over the Assyrians, distinct from the Kawa mythos itself. This ongoing academic debate underscores the evolving interpretations of Newroz within Kurdish intellectual thought and the dynamic process through which cultural symbols are imbued with meaning.

Table 3: Kurdish Newroz in Literature and Historical Interpretation

Author/Figure/Interpreter	Period	Work/Contribution	Significance to Newroz Narrative	Key Snippet References
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Melayê Cizîrî	c. 1570–1640	<i>Diwan</i> (collection of poems)	Celebrated Newroz as a day of "eternal light" and the New Year; foundational in Kurdish poetry.	
Ehmedê Xanî	1650–1706	<i>Mem û Zîn</i> (epic poem)	Referenced Newroz's significance; <i>Mem û Zîn</i> often features Newroz celebrations as a cultural backdrop.	
Sherefxan Bidlisi	16th Century	<i>Sharafnameh</i> (history of Kurds)	Retold the Kawa and Zahhak legend, embedding it in Kurdish historical accounts.	6
Taufik Abdullah (Pîremêrd)	1930s	Poetry and intellectual work	Popularized and systematized the Kawa myth's connection to Newroz, making it a symbol of Kurdish national struggle and cultural revival.	
Modern Kurdish Historians	20th–21st Century	Historical research	Link Newroz (March 21st) to the Median victory over Assyrians and the fall of Nineveh (612 BCE), framing it as a celebration of ancient Kurdish liberation/sovereignty.	
Zainal Abedin Znar	Contemporary (cited scholar)	Academic critique	Argues the Kawa-Zahhak-Newroz linkage is a	9

			later, possibly misleading, conflation; suggests older roots for Newroz in nature worship or distinct historical events.	
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VI. A Symbol Forged in Struggle: Newroz, Kurdish Identity, and Political Resistance

A. Newroz as a Cornerstone of Kurdish National Identity

For the Kurdish people, Newroz transcends its function as a mere seasonal festival or New Year marker; it stands as a fundamental and deeply resonant expression of their collective identity, history, and enduring aspirations for self-determination. The legend of Kawa the Blacksmith, with its powerful themes of liberation from a tyrannical foreign ruler, resonates profoundly with the historical and ongoing struggles faced by the Kurdish nation, a people who have long sought cultural recognition and political rights. The celebration itself acts as what one scholar described as the "biggest gravity force that brings Kurds together," effectively transcending internal political, cultural, and dialectal divides. It is a shared national celebration, a unifying emblem for Kurds across their homeland and throughout the global diaspora.

B. The Politicization of Newroz in the 20th and 21st Centuries

The association of Newroz with Kurdish national identity and political aspirations became increasingly pronounced from the mid-20th century onwards. This period coincided with a significant rise in Kurdish national consciousness and activism, both within the traditional Kurdish regions of the Middle East and among the growing Kurdish diaspora communities in Europe and elsewhere.

As overt expressions of Kurdish culture and identity faced increasing suppression from the states governing Kurdish-inhabited territories, the revival and celebration of Newroz took on a more intense and overtly politicized character. The festival evolved into a potent symbol of Kurdish resilience, cultural perseverance, and what some have termed a "Kurdish resurrection". By the late 1980s, Newroz was inextricably linked with concerted efforts to express, assert, and revitalize Kurdish identity in the face of denial and assimilationist pressures.

C. State Suppression and Prohibition of Newroz

The potent symbolism of Newroz as an emblem of Kurdish identity and unity led to its suppression by various states.

Turkey:

The Turkish state historically viewed Newroz, particularly its Kurdish iteration, as a significant threat to national security and territorial integrity, primarily due to its strong association with Kurdish nationalism and aspirations for self-rule. Successive Turkish governments implemented policies aimed at suppressing or eradicating distinct Kurdish identity, and Newroz celebrations became a focal point of these efforts. For many decades, the public celebration of Newroz was explicitly banned in Turkey. Even when the ban was officially lifted in the 1990s under Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel, the state attempted to co-opt and reframe the festival. This involved promoting the Turkish spelling "Nevruz" and asserting its origins in Central Asian Turkic traditions, a clear attempt to dilute its specific Kurdish connotations and counter rising Kurdish national sentiment. The authentic Kurdish spelling "Newroz" often remained forbidden, and media outlets using it could face prosecution. These policies were frequently accompanied by harsh actions from security forces, who often violently suppressed Newroz gatherings. A particularly tragic instance occurred in 1992, when over 90 Kurdish participants were killed by Turkish forces during Newroz celebrations. Further deaths and injuries were reported in other years, such as in 2008. Prior to its partial legalization, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) had strategically chosen the Newroz festival period to stage attacks or demonstrations, leading to mass detentions of individuals perceived as supporters of Kurdish movements.

Iran (East Kurdistan):

In Iran, the state has also historically imposed significant restrictions on Newroz celebrations in East Kurdistan (the Kurdish-inhabited regions of western Iran). While Nowruz (the Persian spelling) is an officially recognized national holiday throughout Iran, Kurdish-themed celebrations of Newroz, with their distinct cultural markers and historical narratives, are often viewed by the authorities as expressions of Kurdish identity that could fuel dissent and challenge the state's authority and its Persian-centric national ideology.

Tactics employed by Iranian authorities have included banning public gatherings specifically for Kurdish Newroz, maintaining a heavy and intimidating security presence in Kurdish areas during the festival period, and engaging in arrests, crackdowns, and harassment of participants and organizers. For example, in the period leading up to Newroz in 2025, reports indicated that Iranian forces established numerous checkpoints, blocked access to traditional celebration sites, and arrested hundreds of individuals for wearing traditional Kurdish attire, such as the *Camane* (a type of headscarf) or khaki-colored clothing, or for simply participating in Newroz festivities. Media control, censorship of Kurdish cultural expressions like songs and dances, and the harassment of activists promoting Newroz through social media are also common practices. Authorities have sometimes cited religious justifications, such as deeming certain traditions "un-Islamic" or noting an overlap with the Islamic month of Ramadan, or political reasons, such as accusing celebrations of promoting separatism, to legitimize bans or restrictions on Kurdish Newroz events.

Syria:

In Syria, the rise to power of the Ba'ath Party in 1963 heralded a period of systematic repression against the Kurdish population, which included an explicit ban on public Newroz celebrations. The Syrian government labeled Kurdish Newroz a "threat to national security"

due to its potent symbolic connection to Kurdish national identity and aspirations. Consequently, for many years, Newroz celebrations were forced to take place clandestinely, if at all.

Public attempts by Kurds to celebrate Newroz were often met with violent oppression from state security forces, leading to deaths, injuries, and mass arrests. A notable instance was the martyrdom of Suleiman Adi in Damascus in 1986, during what was reportedly the first public Newroz celebration in the city. In 2008, three young Kurdish men, who became known as the "Three Mohammads," were killed in Qamishli when security forces opened fire on Newroz celebrants. More recently, with shifts in political control in some Kurdish-majority areas of Syria, Kurds have been able to celebrate Newroz more openly, though concerns and challenges often remain.

The intensity of state suppression across these regions, rather than extinguishing the celebration, paradoxically amplified its significance. The act of prohibition transformed a cultural festival into a potent political statement, where participation itself became an act of defiance and cultural preservation. The state's fear of Newroz inadvertently validated its power as a unifying Kurdish symbol.

D. Newroz as a Platform for Resistance and Cultural Revival

The very act of celebrating Newroz, especially in contexts where it has been banned, restricted, or met with hostility, transforms the festival into a powerful and courageous statement of resistance, resilience, and the unwavering assertion of Kurdish identity and cultural rights. It becomes a moment where joy, tradition, and collective action serve as radical tools for cultural survival.

A pivotal moment in the modern history of Newroz as a symbol of resistance was the sacrifice of Mazlum Doğan. A Kurdish activist imprisoned in the notorious Diyarbakir (Amed) prison in Turkey, Doğan set himself on fire on the eve of Newroz in 1982 as an ultimate act of protest against the brutal conditions and the denial of Kurdish identity. His act, and his reported final words, "Resistance is life," had a profound impact, reigniting the spirit of Newroz as a symbol of active resistance, particularly in Northern Kurdistan (Turkey). Mazlum Doğan is now revered as the "Kawa of the modern era," a powerful example of mythopoesis where contemporary acts of resistance are consciously framed within the ancient mythological narrative of liberation, creating a seamless continuity between past and present struggles.

Contemporary Newroz celebrations, whether in the Kurdish homeland or within the global diaspora, often explicitly link the festival to enduring themes of freedom, solidarity with ongoing struggles for rights and recognition, and staunch resistance to oppression. Modern Newroz events may include panel discussions addressing pressing political issues, artistic performances by musicians and poets who symbolize resistance (such as the Kurdish rapper Yasin, who performed shortly after being released from an Iranian prison), and expressions of solidarity with other oppressed groups, thereby broadening the festival's scope as a platform for advocating justice and human rights.

Table 4: Newroz Suppression and Resistance Across Kurdistan

Region/Country	Forms of State	Key	Symbolic	Key Snippet
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	Suppression	Incidents/Periods of Resistance	Figures/Events	References
Turkey (Northern Kurdistan)	Bans on celebrations, promotion of "Nevruz" to dilute Kurdish meaning, prohibition of "Newroz" spelling, violent crackdowns, arrests, killings.	1992 Newroz killings (over 90 victims); ongoing restrictions; politicization since 1980s; PKK utilization of Newroz for publicity.	Mazlum Doğan's 1982 self-immolation ("modern Kawa"); "Resistance is life" slogan.	
Iran (Eastern Kurdistan)	Restrictions on Kurdish-themed celebrations, viewing them as dissent; bans on public gatherings, heavy security presence, arrests for traditional attire.	2025 crackdown: checkpoints, arrests for wearing Kurdish clothes (Camane), blocking access to celebration sites; media censorship; harassment of activists.	Ongoing defiance through celebration despite threats; wearing traditional attire as resistance.	
Syria (Western Kurdistan)	Ba'ath Party ban on public Newroz (labeled "threat to national security"); violent repression of celebrations, arrests, killings.	Clandestine celebrations for decades; 1986 Damascus martyrdom (Suleiman Adi); 2008 Qamishli killings ("Three Mohammads"); more open celebrations recently in some areas under new transitional government.	Suleiman Adi; The "Three Mohammads"; persistence of celebrations despite repression.	

VII. Conclusion: The Enduring Spirit of Kurdish Newroz

A. Recapitulation of Newroz's Multifaceted Significance

The history of Kurdish Newroz is a compelling narrative of cultural endurance, adaptation, and

profound symbolic meaning. From its ancient origins, likely rooted in the observation of seasonal renewal and intertwined with early Iranian belief systems such as Zoroastrianism and Mithraism, Newroz has evolved into a uniquely Kurdish expression. This distinctiveness is centrally defined by the powerful legend of Kawa the Blacksmith, whose victory over the tyrant Zahhak and the subsequent lighting of fires on the mountainside serve as the foundational myth of liberation and the "new day" for the Kurdish people.

The celebration of Newroz is characterized by core components that underscore its cultural vitality: the sacred bonfires blaze as a symbol of freedom and purification; communal gatherings resonate with traditional music, vibrant folk dances like the Govend, and the proud display of colorful Kurdish attire; and feasts featuring special dishes like Aprax mark a time of shared joy and hospitality. Furthermore, Newroz is deeply embedded in Kurdish literary and oral traditions, with classical poets like Melayê Cizîrî and Ehmedê Xanî, as well as modern intellectuals like Pîremêrd, contributing to its rich tapestry of meaning.

Over time, and particularly in the face of adversity, Newroz has solidified its status as an undeniable and potent symbol of Kurdish national identity. It embodies the resilience of a people, their unyielding spirit in the quest for cultural recognition, and their continuous struggle for political rights. The themes of renewal inherent in Newroz are thus not only natural and seasonal but also deeply social and political, reflecting an enduring hope for justice and self-determination.

B. Newroz as a Living Heritage: Contemporary Relevance and Future Outlook

Kurdish Newroz is far from a static relic of the past; it is a dynamic and living heritage, continually adapted and reinterpreted by successive generations of Kurds, both within their ancestral homeland and across the global diaspora. The festival's core themes—renewal, liberation, the triumph of light over darkness, and good over evil—remain profoundly relevant to contemporary Kurdish experiences and their ongoing aspirations for a brighter future. The enduring spirit of Kurdish Newroz, despite centuries of political turmoil, fragmentation, and concerted attempts at suppression, demonstrates the remarkable power of cultural memory and ritual in sustaining a collective identity, particularly for a stateless nation. Newroz is not merely an event that is remembered; it is actively *lived* and *re-enacted* annually. This yearly performance reinforces communal bonds, transmits historical narratives, and strengthens cultural cohesion in a manner that political discourse alone often cannot achieve. The very act of celebrating, especially when it has been forbidden or discouraged, becomes a powerful reaffirmation of "Kurdishness" and a collective refusal to be culturally or historically erased.

Furthermore, the continued and often highly visible celebration of Newroz by the global Kurdish diaspora serves a crucial dual purpose. Internally, it maintains cultural continuity for communities dispersed far from their homeland, ensuring that traditions are passed to younger generations. Externally, these celebrations act as a form of cultural diplomacy, raising international awareness of Kurdish identity, culture, and the political issues they face on a global stage. In this way, Newroz stands as a testament to the enduring power of cultural

heritage to sustain a people's spirit, foster unwavering unity, and carry the inextinguishable flame of hope forward into the future.

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