

Legitimacy of Nawruz by Ahl al-Bayt and Fatimi Ismaili Imams: Islamic Cultural Study

Qazi Dr. Shaikh Abbas Borhany al-Waleed

PhD (USA), NDI, Shahadat al-Alamiyyah (Al-Hawzah al-'ilmiyyah, Najaf, Iraq), M.A, LLM (Shari'ah)

Musheer: Federal Shariat Court of Pakistan

Member: Ulama' Council of Pakistan

Chairman: The Guardian Pakistan

Attorney at Law & Religious Scholar

Website: www.durrenajaf.com

Academia: <https://durrenajaf.academia.edu/QaziBorhany>

Contact for spiritual help: najafspiritualcenter@gmail.com

Abstract: *This study critically examines the religious, historical, and symbolic significance of Nawruz within Muslim societies, with particular reference to Shi'i, Fatimi, and Ahl al-Bayt devotional traditions. Although Nawruz originated as a pre-Islamic Persian spring festival, this paper reassesses it through the lenses of Muslim history, Shariah legitimacy, Imami authority, and devotional symbolism. Drawing upon reports attributed to Al Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (as), the study explores the sacred meanings attached to Nawruz, including its association with the creation of Adam (as), the primordial covenant or Mithaq, the destruction of idols by Ibrahim (as), the first Wahy upon Rasulullah (S), the declaration of Wilayah of Amir al-Mu'minin Ali ibn Abi Talib (as) at Ghadir al-Khum, and the eschatological hope connected with the triumph of Al Qa'im and the establishment of divine Adl. The paper further traces the historical adoption and adaptation of Nawruz among Muslims, beginning with Sayyiduna Salman al-Farsi (ra), whose cultural mediation represents an early model of incorporating inherited customs within the ethical limits of Islam. The marriage of Al Imam al-Husayn (as) to Sayyidah Shahr'e Bano (as) is also considered as reinforcing the cultural and spiritual continuity of Nawruz within the household of the Ahl al-Bayt (as). Through Umayyad, Abbasid, Shi'i, and especially Fatimi Ismaili contexts, Nawruz developed into a courtly, devotional, and communal observance marked by charity, gift exchange, ceremonial robes, royal processions, illuminations, banquets, acts of Tabarruk, and regulated public rejoicing. Particular attention is given to Fatimi practice in Al Muizziyyah al-Qahirah, Misr, where Nawruz was transformed from a seasonal festival into an expression of Imami authority, religious decorum, communal blessing, and courtly splendour. Its later transmission from Misr to Yemen, and subsequently to India and Sindh, illustrates the movement of sacred culture across Muslim geographies, even as its decline within the Yemeni Tayyibi Da'wah reflected the priorities of survival, Aqidah preservation, and continuity under Satr. Finally, the study interprets the domestic Nawruz Sufreh or Dastar Khawn-comprising Qur'an, green wheat, sweets, fruits, garlic, coins, candles, mirror, goldfish, eggs, and rose-water-as a symbolic expression of Hidayah, renewal, health, prosperity, light, fertility, and spiritual purification. The paper argues that Nawruz, when purified of Mushrikin remnants and moral excess, derives legitimacy not from ethnic origin but from conformity with Tawhid, Wilayah, and Shariah ethics.*

Keywords: Nawruz; Fatimi Imams; Ahl al-Bayt; Wilayah; Ghadir al-Khum; Sufreh; Dastar Khawn; Islamic Festivals; Ismailis, Muslim Culture

1. Religious Significance of Nawruz in Islam:

Existence of Nawruz amongst Muslims can be traced back to the dawn of Islam. Rasulullah (S) being a keen observer and respecter of diversity asked about Nawruz from Sayyiduna Salman al-Farsi (ra), who appeared well-dressed in Nabavi presence, with the gift of coloured eggs. Sayyiduna Salman (ra) informed that native of Fars enjoyed this day as a beginning of spring. He used to prepare sweets on this day and present them to Rasulullah (S). Our beloved Nabi participated with his Ash'ab (ra) and gave us a scale to judge that "there is no harm in the adoption of good festivals which are free from acts repugnant to the Shariah". Our Nabi also offered Dua for Muslims on this special day, hence with the entrance of Sayyiduna Salman al-Farsi (ra), Muslims also got the gift of Nawruz. The customs of Nawruz became more important when Moula Abi Abdillah al Imam al-Husayn ibn Ali (as) got married to Sayyidah Shahar'e Bano (as), the daughter of an Iranian King. She along with the Ahl al-Bayt (as) used to celebrate Nawruz and prepare sweets at home. Nawruz falls on 1 Farvardin in the Iranian Solar calendar, which consistently coincides with the Northern Hemisphere's vernal equinox-typically falling on March 20th or 21st on the Gregorian calendar. Because the Islamic calendar is strictly Qamari - lunar, the Gregorian/Solar date of Nawruz shifts across Islamic lunar months, like Shawwal, Rajab, or Sha'ban every year. Nawruz falls on March 21st on the Gregorian calendar, but in the Fatimi Ismaili tradition, it is calculated astronomically based on the exact minute the sun crosses the celestial equator (the vernal equinox) to mark the first day of spring. Because it is determined by the solar calendar and the precise moment of the equinox, the exact hour changes every year, but it consistently falls on either March 20th or March 21st.

Muhammad Baqir Majlisi [1] quoted several narrations from Moula Abi Abdillah al-Imam Jafar al-Sadiq (as). In one episode transmitted by Moalla bin Khunais, the Imam (as) said:

- i). On the day of Nawruz Adam (as) was born.
- ii). On this day Allah took the Mithaq from the Arw'ah Muqaddisah.
- iii). On the day of Nawruz, Ibrahim (as) destroyed the idols.
- iv). On the day of Nawruz, Rasulullah (S) received the first Wahi.
- v). On the day of Nawruz, Rasulullah (S) raised Ali (as) on his shoulders to smash 360 idols from the inside and top of the Kabah.
- vi). Besides all these historical facts, the most joyous is that Rasulullah (S) declared and appointed Ali ibn Abi Talib (as) as his sole legitimate Successor, by Nass'e Jali among seventy thousand Muslims, at Ghadir al-Khum.
- vii). It will be the day when Qa'im al-Qiyamah (S) shall deliver Adl.

The Bektashi Sufi order in present-day Turkey, for instance, celebrate Nawruz (Turkish Nevruz) not because of the New Year it is to herald, but to commemorate the Spiritual Birthday of Amir al-Muminin Ali ibn Abi Talib (as), and also in his capacity as the symbolic founder of most Sufi orders throughout Islamic history. Furthermore, Nawruz was marked in Damishq by the exchange of gifts during the period of the Umayyads. "Ahmad al-Yaqubi" was a Muslim geographer and perhaps the first historian of world culture in the Abbasid era. He [2] writes that during the era of Second

Khalifah Nawruz and Mehrjan gifts were abolished through an order. Later on, Yazid II withdrew this ban.

2. Historical Observance of Nawruz in Muslim Societies:

The Abbasid emperors also gave importance to this day. Abbasid Emperor Mansur (L) declared this day as "Eid an-Nawruz". During the Abbasid era, people rose early in the morning and went to the site of water - rivers and lakes, collected it in a vassel and poured it over themselves. [3] "Al-Tabari" writes that they also sprinkled water on each other. In the time of Abbasid Emperor Mutawakkil (L), Nawruz was celebrated with great pomp and jubilation. [4] Famous historian "Al-Maqrizi" writes in his Khitat that the Abbasid Emperor Mutawwakil (L) struck five million Dirhams painted in colours of red, yellow and black, for showering upon his courtiers and personnel. Masked Actors (Ash'ab al-Samaja) appeared before the Abbasid Emperor, who flung coins at them and distributed roses dipped in red Amber. [5] "Ibn Zubayr" reports that at one Nawruz, the play of Samaja was arranged for Abbasid Emperor Mutadid, which cost 13,000 Dinars. A variety of sweet dishes, such as Sabuniyya and Lawzinaj were cooked and then distributed amongst the guests. "Al-Tabari" [6] quoted that during the era of Abbasid Emperor Mutawakkil (L) a poet "Buhturi" composed the poem in which he said:

"Nawruz has attained its lost glory; which was introduced by Ardasher;"

Like the Persian Emperors, the Abbasid Emperors used to appear in their courts dressed up in their best attire to collect valuable gifts from their courtiers and others. It was also marked by an exchange of gifts. [7] "Tanakhi" (d. 384/994) writes that Abbasid Emperor Mutawakkil (L) used to sit in his chamber from morning to evening, accepting the gifts offered to him by the high ranking officials and other dignitaries. In Baghdad, the common people on this festive occasion illuminated their houses with cotton pods and clay censers [8]. The royal houses at the same time would be lit with pods of costly materials, such as the light Zahri cloth soaked in oil of balsam as well as other expensive oils were burned in censers of stone. During the six days of Nawruz festival, the people in Baghdad gathered in the streets and lit fires. "Al-Tabari" writes [9] that in 284/897, Abbasid emperor Mutadid tried to prevent the unrestrained rejoicing in the streets during the summer, but after two days he was obliged to let public resume their customary practice. "Ibn Hawqal" (d. 367) writes [10] that in the 10th century in Jibal, people celebrated Nawruz for seven consecutive days with much enthusiasm and joviality. They cooked a number of delicious meals and donned elaborate costumes and spent on the celebrations. They organized various sports, arranged parties, and feasted even on the roofs of their buildings. "Thabit" notes in his History [11] that the people in Baghdad hired a special cook to work during the night to have the dishes fresh in the morning, and gave parties for relatives and friends, at which they served green melons, plums, peaches, and dates. Women purchased perfumes for the day. Eggs were dyed in various colours. People sprayed Bukhur on each other for driving away the evil influence, laziness, and fever. Furthermore, this was considered a good day for taking medicine. People hit each other with water-skins or threw water in their houses or gardens, while common folk did this on the streets.

3. Nawruz under the Fatimi Imams: Its Spiritual Significance and Historical Celebration

Nawruz occupies a place of great spiritual and historical significance. Its importance is not merely cultural or seasonal, but is also rooted in religious meaning and sacred memory. According to the tradition, Nawruz is the day on which Rabb Ta'ala accepted the Ahd of His servants: that they would perform His Ibadah alone, associate nothing with Him, believe in His Anbiya and Hujjah, and believe in the Imams. It is described as the first day upon which the Sun rose, the winds blew, and the splendour of the world was created. The same tradition further associates Nawruz with several great divine events. It is the day on which Ark of Nuḥ (as) grounded upon Mount Ararat. It is the day on which Rabb Ta'ala resurrected the thousands who had gone forth from their homes in fear of death, when Rabb said to them: "Die," and then brought them back to life, as referred to in Qur'an 2:243. It is also the day on which Jibrael (as) appeared in the presence of Rasulullah (S). It is the day on which Rasulullah (S) bore the Amir al-Muminin, Ali (as), upon his shoulder, so that Ali could throw down and destroy the idols of the Quraysh from atop the Kaabah, just as Ibrahim (as) had destroyed idols before him. The tradition further states that Nawruz is the day on which Rasulullah (S) ordered his Ash'ab to give Mithaq to Ali as Amir al-Muminin. It is also the day on which Rasulullah (S) turned Ali (as) towards the valley of the Jinn so that he could receive their Bayah. Finally, it is described as the day on which the Resurrector, the Qa'im, shall appear with his deputies, and the day on which the Qa'im shall triumph over the Dajjal. In this way, Nawruz is presented not only as a festival of joy, but as a day connected with covenant, creation, prophecy, Walayah, resurrection, and final triumph.

Historically, Nawruz was also celebrated in Sham and Misr under the magnificent Fatimi Empire. Within the jurisdiction of the Fatimi Empire [12], it was observed with official recognition, and a national holiday was declared. The celebration of Nawruz in Al Muizziyyah al-Qahirah appears to have been well established by the time of the Bani Fatimah's conquest of Misr. Its celebration in Cairo is referred to by al-Maqrizi in al-Khitat (4:241–242), where he records the regal ceremony and public splendour associated with the occasion. During the Fatimi period, the city of Al Muizziyyah al-Qahirah was beautifully illuminated with Misbah, the traditional hanging lamps, creating an atmosphere of radiance and joy. The people celebrated Nawruz in obedience to the Imami Farman, that is, the order of the Imam. This gives the celebration a distinct Fatimi character: it was not merely a popular festivity, but one observed under the guidance, sanction, and spiritual authority of the Imam. On the occasion of Nawruz, the Imam rode in great majesty to Al Jame al-Azhar. The Imam proceeded beneath a golden royal umbrella, described in the source as the Mizalla Mudhahhaba (gold umbrella). He carried the royal stick, known as Qadib, and wore a white turban along with the Taylasan historically worn over the shoulders, especially by scholars, judges, or dignitaries, while being girded with a sword. Taylasan means a shawl, mantle, cloak, or scarf-like outer garment, traditionally worn over the head and shoulders. In Islamic historical usage, it was often associated with scholars, judges, jurists, and persons of rank. Some dictionaries describe it as a dark or black rounded mantle placed over the shoulders. The Imam's appearance combined spiritual authority, royal dignity, and ceremonial splendour. He was accompanied by a large procession of approximately five thousand men, reflecting the

importance of the occasion within the Fatimi state and its ceremonial calendar. The Imam also presented royal costumes and robes, including garments described as Siglaton (Italian) robes. "Siqlatun" or "Siglaton" was a medieval luxury textile-name, corresponding in European sources to ciclatoun/ siclatoun/ siglaton. It referred principally to a fine and costly silk, often richly coloured and sometimes associated with gold thread or cloth-of-gold. In an Italian or Sicilian context about a thousand years ago, it should be understood as a high-status Mediterranean luxury fabric, connected with the broader Byzantine-Islamic silk tradition. The strongest evidence supports its use as a term for expensive silken or gold-enriched cloth. This distribution of robes and costumes formed part of the royal and ceremonial culture of the Fatimi court. It symbolised honour, rank, favour, and participation in the blessings of the day. A grand banquet followed the procession and ceremonial presentation. The royal chef, or Sahib al-Maidah, together with his servants, carried trays from the Qasr. These trays contained one hundred collections of wide bowls. The bowls were covered with round pieces of silk, and on top of them were mats scented with light musk, known as Misk Fatih. The description conveys the refinement, grandeur, and elegance of the Fatimi court. The banquet was not only a meal, but a royal act of generosity and a manifestation of abundance, blessing, and ceremonial hospitality. When the banquet was over, each person took what remained from the food and offerings as Barakah and Tabarruk. The source describes this as being taken for al-Sharaf wal-Barakah, meaning honour and blessing. This detail is significant because it shows that the leftovers of the royal and Imami banquet were not viewed merely as remaining food, but as something carrying honour, blessing, and sacred association. The celebration of Nawruz also found expression in Fatimi poetry. Amir Tamim al-Fatimi (337–374 / 948–984), the eldest son of Al Imam al-Muiz (as), was among the renowned poets of the Fatimi age. In his Diwan, he eulogised the Imam from the progeny of Muhammad (S) and connected the joy and delight of Nawruz with the Noor of the Imam. His verses state: [13]

*If Nawruz is a festival of joy and delight;
It is through your Noor that it has come to be so.*

These lines show how the celebration of Nawruz was understood in a Fatimi devotional and literary framework. The festival's joy is not presented as independent or merely seasonal; rather, it is illuminated by the presence, light, and spiritual authority of the Imam. It must also be remembered that Misr under the Fatimiyyn remained a tolerant Muslim empire. Al Muizziyyah al-Qahirah housed a large Sunni population, along with other communities living under Fatimi rule. When Al Imam al-Muiz (as) observed that the general Muslim population did not take much interest in the festival, he responded with administrative sensitivity and restraint. Instead of imposing the celebration broadly upon all inhabitants of the city, he restricted the festivities of Nawruz to the Fatimi Masajid, Mashahid, and the jurisdiction of the 'Royal Enclave'. Accordingly, in 363 / 974, the well-known celebration of Nawruz moved from the streets of Al Muizziyyah al-Qahirah to the limits of the Fatimi Royal Enclave. This relocation of the celebrations from the broader public streets to the Fatimi Royal Enclave reflects the tolerance policy of the Fatimiyyn. It demonstrates that the Fatimi administration recognised the diversity of the population and exercised care in preserving communal harmony, while still maintaining the observance of

Nawruz within the spaces most closely associated with Fatimi religious and royal authority. Thus, the celebration of Nawruz under the Fatimi Empire may be understood through three connected dimensions:

- i. First, its spiritual significance as a day of Ahd, divine events, Walayah, and eschatological promise;*
- ii. Second, its historical and royal celebration in Al Muizziyyah al-Qahirah, with processions, illumination, robes, banquets, and Barakah;*
- iii. Third, the tolerant and measured approach of the Fatimiyyn, who preserved the festival within the Fatimi Royal Enclave while respecting the broader religious composition of Misr.*

After shifting the highest seat of learning of the Ismaili Tayyibi Daw'ah to Yemen in 1132 CE, under the leadership of 1st Al-Dai al-Mutlaq, Sayyiduna al-Dhu'ayb ibn Musa al-Wadi'i al-Hamdani many changes occurred. Like Al Muizziyyah al-Qahirah, Misr, Yemen was not a cultural-hub, it was a remote mountainous range, so the native did not retain each and every cultural-practice of Al Muizziyyah al-Qahirah in Yemen. After the Satr of Al-Imam al-Tayyib Abi al-Qasim (as), the central concern was not the celebration of festivities, but the survival of the Da'wah mission: preserving the Aqidah of the Muminin, safeguarding Fatimi learning, maintaining the Da'wah hierarchy, and protecting the community amid hostile political pressure, particularly from the brutal Ayyubids. After al-Malikah al-Hurrah al-Sayyidah Arwa's death in 1138 CE, political upheavals followed, and the Fatimi literary legacy was concealed by later Du'at in Yemen. In such circumstances, a solar-cultural public festival like Nawruz would naturally have lost importance and would have become difficult to celebrate. Yemen's religious environment was different from Al-Muizziyyah al-Qahirah, which was a cosmopolitan imperial hub. Fatimi Qahirah was an imperial capital shaped by Persian, Egyptian, Arab, military, bureaucratic, and courtly influences. By contrast, Yemen's Ismaili Tayyibi community lived among strong tribal, Zaydi, Sunni, and local Yemeni traditions. For a minority Da'wah, it was safer and more coherent to emphasize Islamic and Ismaili obligations tied to the Hijrah calendar and to the authority of the hidden Imam, rather than preserve a Persian-origin public new-year festival. Therefore, the historical reply is that Nawruz remained known in the wider Islamic world and even in parts of Yemen; however, after the Ismaili Tayyibi Da'wah separated from Fatimi Qahirah, it was not carried forward as an essential Yemeni Ismaili Tayyibi ritual because it belonged more to Fatimi imperial-court culture than to the core Aqidah of the Da'wah. The Yemeni Da'wah's priority became the continuity of Imamah through al-Imam al-Tayyib (as), the preservation of learning, and survival under Satr - not the public celebration of a Persian solar festival. Similarly when the highest seat of the learning of the Ismaili Tayyibi Dawah transferred to India from Yemen, religious festivals of Yemen were partly transferred to India as a gift of Arabia.

4. Symbolic Significance of the Nawruz Dastar Khawn among Devotees of the Ahl al-Bayt (as):

On the day of Nawruz, devotees of the Ahl al-Bayt (as) prepare a special Sufreh or Dastar Khawn in their homes. Although Nawruz is historically rooted in the wider Fars cultural sphere, it has been absorbed into the devotional life of several Muslim communities, including Shi'i

communities, where the day is often marked by Dua, Dhikr, family gathering, Khayrat, and the preparation of symbolic foods. The domestic Sufreh functions as a ritual table of hope, blessing, and renewal. It resembles the well-known Haft-Sin spread of Iranian Nawruz, as a ceremonial cloth or table on which symbolic items are placed for the New Year. The spread may include a mirror, candles, the Qur'an or other revered texts, water with a goldfish, rose-water, honey, sugar, coloured eggs, fruit such as apples, oranges and pomegranates, sweets, nuts, raisins, garlic, coins, and sprouted wheat or barley. In devotional households, the Qur'an is placed at the head of the Sufreh as the primary sign of Hidayah and Barakah. Its presence transforms the spread from a merely festive arrangement into a religiously meaningful domestic ritual.

Fertile wheat seeds or green sprouts represent rebirth, fertility, strength, and the hope of abundant Rizq. The sprouting of wheat, barley, or lentils is one of the most recognizable elements of the Nawruz table. It identifies Sabza as wheat or barley grown for the occasion, as a sign of rebirth and renewal.

Sweets symbolize the sweetness of life, happiness, affection, and social harmony. Their placement on the Sufreh reflects the wish that the coming year should be filled with joy, good relations, and pleasant speech. Sweets, honey, sugar, sweetened bread, and rose-water among the items traditionally associated with the Nawruz spread.

Fruits and dry fruits indicate longevity, fertility, prosperity, and the continuity of life. Pomegranates, apples, oranges, quinces, raisins, and nuts are attested as common festive items on the Nowruz spread. In Afghan Nawruz practice, the related dish Haft Mewa consists of dried fruits and nuts, often including raisins, pistachios, hazelnuts, walnuts, almonds, dried apricots, and Senjed, thereby preserving the wider Fars association between dried fruits, abundance, and the arrival of spring.

Raisins and garlic are associated with health, preservation, and protection. Garlic in particular is a traditional Haft-Sin item. Garlic was esteemed among Iranians as a medicine and as a means of warding off harm and the evil eye. In the devotional interpretation of the Sufreh, raisins and garlic may therefore be read as signs of bodily health and protection from misfortune.

Nuts represent nourishment, memory, intelligence, and the strengthening of the mind. While the specific interpretation of nuts as "intelligence" appears to be a local or community-based meaning, nuts themselves are well attested on the Nawruz spread. Ajil, a mixture of roasted seeds, chickpeas, grains, nuts, and raisins, as part of the Sufreh.

Mint is interpreted as a sign of healing and cure. This meaning is consistent with the broader use of fresh greenery and herbs in Nawruz symbolism, where living plants signify renewal, freshness, and the restoration of vitality. Green herbs and germinated plants are among the items added to the spread in many households.

Cloves and rose-water signify fragrance, refinement, hospitality, and the pleasure of life. It is one of the traditional items placed on the Nowruz spread, along with honey and sugar. In a devotional setting, fragrance also carries a spiritual association, suggesting purity, welcome, and reverence.

Gold coins are placed as signs of prosperity, lawful livelihood, and material blessing. Coins as a sign of wealth.

Candles symbolize light, goodness, divine illumination, and the triumph of brightness over darkness. It describes candles on the Nowruz table as symbolizing holy fire, while Smithsonian Folklife explains Nowruz more broadly as marking the overcoming of darkness and sorrow and the triumph of light and joy.

Goldfish in water represent life, movement, purity, and the renewal of creation. A jar of water containing a goldfish as a traditional item of the Nowruz table and explains the fish within the broader symbolic world of water, life, and protection.

Pomegranates signify fertility, blessing, abundance, and sacred beauty. Pomegranates among the fruits traditionally placed on the Sufreh. Their many seeds make them especially suitable as symbols of increase, continuity, and communal flourishing.

The mirror represents self-reflection, purity, wisdom, and the created order. The mirror is placed at the head of the Sufreh and flanked by candles. The mirror reflects “the light of wisdom and creation.”

Nawruz eggs are a vibrant and symbolic element of the Haft-Seen table placed in homes to celebrate the New Year of Fars. They represent fertility, creation, and the renewal of life as spring begins. Families traditionally hard-boil and color eggs with bright dyes, or hand-paint them with intricate floral and calligraphy designs. Often, each family member paints their own egg to represent themselves, and these are then displayed together in a bowl or decorative basket.

Accordingly, the Nawruz Sufreh among devotees of the Ahl al-Bayt (as) may be understood as a devotional adaptation of a wider Fars spring ritual. Its objects do not merely decorate the home; they express a vocabulary of Dua: Hidayah through the Qur’an, renewal through green wheat, health through garlic and herbs, sweetness through confectionery, prosperity through coins, light through candles, fertility through eggs and pomegranates, and self-purification through the mirror. The Sufreh therefore becomes a domestic space where cultural memory, seasonal renewal, and religious devotion are brought together.

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