

A photograph of a stone wall at night, with a string of lit candles or lanterns hanging across it. The scene is dimly lit, with the warm glow of the candles providing the primary light source. The stone wall is made of large, irregular blocks, and the overall atmosphere is one of quiet celebration and resilience.

# NEWROZ

a celebration of  
Kurdish culture  
and resistance

The spring new year, which is observed on the equinox by many different peoples in the Middle East and Central Asia, has become, for Kurds, a symbol of Kurdish culture and political resistance and the most important day of celebration.

The spring festival featured in Kurdish poetry, and, in the last century, celebration of Newroz became an act of resistance against those who would deny Kurdish culture and existence. Thus, the celebration of Newroz has become a focus of contention between the Kurds and the oppressive states in which they live.

Newroz is a time for Kurdish music and dancing, for wearing traditional Kurdish clothes, and for bonfires and torchlit processions. It brings together Kurds from all four parts of Kurdistan and across the diaspora - from Japan to Canada.

Kurds link the festival to the legend of Kawa the Blacksmith, who is said to have led his people in defeating

the tyrant king, Dehaq. The Kawa story has become a Kurdish foundation myth, and has been associated with the capture of Nineveh by the Medes and the collapse of the Assyrian empire.



Legend has it that Dehaq was so evil that spring never arrived. Serpents grew out of his shoulders that demanded to be fed the brains of children. Kawa, who had already lost many children to the serpents, devised a plan to save his remaining child by substituting the brains of sheep. He then used this trick to save other children, who he hid in the mountains. There he trained them into an army, and, led by the blacksmith, they attacked the palace. The king fell to the blacksmith's hammer, and Kawa announced their victory with a fire on the mountain. The next day spring returned to the land.

*This statue of Kawa stood in the centre of Afrin until it was pulled down by the Turkish occupation*

## **NORTH KURDISTAN - TURKEY**

Newroz is a favourite day for important actions, and every such action increases the day's significance. Similarly, every time celebrations are repressed, the importance of celebration grows.

After the 1980 coup, Kurdish activists were incarcerated and tortured in Turkey's prisons. They continued to resist the system from behind bars, inspiring the growth of the Kurdish Freedom Movement. On Newroz 1982, Mazlum Dogun, a founder member of the PKK, hanged himself in protest at prison conditions, first lighting a symbolic fire of three matches and calling on Kurds to revolt. He is remembered every Newroz as the modern Kawa.

Mass celebrations of Newroz were banned in Turkey, but in 1989 thousands of Kurds held them anyway, and some paid with their lives. That didn't stop the celebrations. The most brutal attacks on Newroz took place in 1992. Nusaybin had celebrated in peace, but when it came to Sirnak and Cizre, the government brought in police in



*Cizre 1992*

armoured vehicles to kill unarmed citizens. When the people of Nusaybin staged a protest, they were met with more armoured vehicles, and witnesses recall the sound of bones cracking as these crushed the demonstrators under their treads. The combined death toll was over 100. Mass celebrations have now become accepted, but that doesn't mean that they escape police harassment and mass detentions.



The biggest celebrations are those in Diyarbakir. Newroz has been chosen for important steps in the PKK's long struggle for a peaceful solution to the Kurdish Question, and in 2013, over a million people celebrating Newroz in this unofficial capital of the Kurds, heard, read out, Öcalan's call for peace and for the replacement of armed struggle with democratic politics – the same call that he is making now.



## **WEST KURDISTAN - SYRIA**

Under Baath Party control, celebrations of Newroz were banned in Syria. Kurds celebrated in secret at home or in their villages. In 1986, a public celebration was held in Damascus, and a man was killed when state forces attacked. Public celebrations continued to be met with violent – sometimes fatal – oppression. The authorities attacked and arrested the people celebrating; they tried to incite Arabs to attack the celebrations; and they attempted to obscure the day's importance by designating 21 March as Mothers' Day. None of this stopped people celebrating Newroz – it made them more determined.

From 2012, everything began to change as the Autonomous Administration took over control in North and East Syria. Then, people of all ethnicities were encouraged to take part in public celebrations.

This year, Syria's Interim President has conceded to one of the Kurds' demands and recognised Newroz as a national holiday. Now it can be celebrated legally in all Syria.



*West Kurdistan (Rojava) 2024*



**East Kurdistan 2024**

photo by Farbod1378

## **EAST KURDISTAN - IRAN**

Newroz is also a Persian festival (Nowruz), and is recognised as a national holiday in Iran, but this doesn't mean that Kurds can celebrate in peace. As in other parts of Kurdistan, Kurds in Iran keep this day as a celebration of Kurdish culture and resistance, and that is harshly suppressed by the state. In recent years, thousands have gathered to celebrate, despite the risks attached to all protest and Kurdish cultural expression.

## **SOUTH KURDISTAN - IRAQ**

Newroz played its part in South Kurdistan's long history of resistance. Back in the 1930s, the poet Biramerd called for the rekindling of the Newroz flame, and from the 1960s, Kurdish guerrillas lit Newroz fires on the mountaintops. With the creation of the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq, hundreds of thousands have flocked to the festival celebrations and watched the procession carry flaming torches up Akre's iconic mountain. (See cover image)

*This booklet was written by Sarah Glynn for the Kurdish Working Group in the European Parliament, March 2026*

