

Speak now 1 a

1: Nowruz (speak now 1 a/ lecture and writing 1)

- **Read this text and prepare yourself for class lecture**
- **It is necessary to write a text possibly related to the present topic at the end of each lecture.**

Nowruz is an important festival in Iran, Central Asia and beyond. Read on to find out how people celebrate the Persian New Year.

What is Nowruz?

Nowruz means 'new day' in Persian and is the most important festival of the year in Iran. It is also celebrated in a number of other countries across the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, the Balkans and East Africa, and dates back at least 3,000 years. The holiday has changed over the thousands of years that it has been celebrated, and different regions have preserved or developed different traditions, as well as adding new ones. But wherever it is observed, it celebrates the original message of rebirth and renewal.

When is it celebrated?

Nowruz marks the spring equinox, when night and day are of equal length. This is usually on 20 or 21 March. It's the day when winter changes into spring in the northern hemisphere, and it feels like a new beginning. In Iran it is followed by four days of public holidays, and schools and universities close for two weeks.

How do people prepare for Nowruz?

People start their preparation for the festivities weeks beforehand. They clean their homes from top to bottom, including carpets, windows and curtains. Everyone in the family helps out. Anything broken is repaired or replaced and the house is decorated with flowers. By doing this spring cleaning, people wash away the bad things from the previous year and prepare for better things to come in the New Year.

People prepare a special table in their homes, where they place small dishes holding seven symbolic foods and spices. The names of these foods all start with the letter 's' in Persian and so the table is called the 'seven s's' (*haft-seen*). The dishes generally contain wheat or bean sprouts (*sabze*), vinegar (*serke*), apples (*sib*), garlic (*sir*), a wheat-based pudding called *samanu*, a red spice called *sumac*, and *senjed*, a kind of wild olive which is common in the region. Other symbolic objects can include goldfish, painted eggs, candles and a mirror. The seven s's symbolise life, love, health and prosperity

How is it celebrated?

Fire forms an important part of the celebrations and bonfires are built and lit on the streets for four Tuesdays in the weeks before Nowruz. On the last Tuesday, people observe the Festival of Fire (*Chaharshanbe Suri*), which involves jumping over these fires, which is believed to bring health and good luck in the New Year.

Iranians spend the night of Nowruz with their family. The traditional New Year dinner is white fish with rice and herbs. Many families give a money gift (called *eydi*) to the children to mark the New Year. People often visit each other's homes and always bring traditional gifts.

People also celebrate on the street. Traditional poetry, song and dance play a key role in the celebrations, and people fill the streets to watch and take part in the performances. Traditional sports are also popular. They often involve horse-riding or wrestling.

When does it end?

The festivities end on the thirteenth day after Nowruz, when people traditionally spend the day picnicking outside. The countryside is full of families eating, dancing, singing and enjoying the last day of the holidays.

2: Ramadan (speak now 1 a/ lecture and writing 2)

- **Read this text and prepare yourself for class lecture**
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Ramadan is a holy month for Muslims. What happens during Ramadan and what does it mean to millions of Muslims worldwide?

What is Ramadan?

Ramadan is a very special time for Muslims all over the world. Observing Ramadan is one of the five 'pillars' of Islam. During Ramadan, all Muslims over the age of about 12, with some exceptions, are expected to fast between dawn and sunset.

When does it take place?

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, which follows the phases of the moon. This means the dates of Ramadan change each year. The month starts when the new crescent moon is first visible in the night sky. Fasting ends with the arrival of the next lunar month, this starts with the first glimpse of the new crescent moon.

How do people fast?

During Ramadan, the day starts early so that people can eat a pre-fast meal before dawn. This meal, called Suhoor, is important as it will keep them going through the day. During daylight hours, fasting Muslims cannot eat food or drink water or any other drinks. In late spring or early summer, this is particularly difficult as the day can be very long. People who live in Polar Regions, where daylight can last 22 hours or more, can choose to follow the dawn and sunset times in Mecca or a nearby country where the sky is dark at night.

Are all Muslims expected to fast?

Not all Muslims are expected to fast. Children under the age of 12, people who are travelling, elderly people, pregnant women and others where it may affect their health are exempt. Those who can't fast for any reason can offer to feed poor people for each day they miss during Ramadan.

What happens at sunset?

People can eat and drink again once the sun has set. The traditional way to break the fast is by eating dates and drinking a glass of water. Then, the evening meal, Iftar, is a social event that can go on for hours. It is common for people to eat together in large groups of family and friends.

Special foods are prepared and shared, and desserts are particularly popular. Muslims often include charity in Iftar as well, sharing Iftar with members of the community who cannot buy or make their own food. Across the Muslim world, mosques and aid organisations set up tents and tables for the public in poorer communities to eat free Iftar meals every night of Ramadan.

Why do people fast?

Muslims fast during Ramadan to bring them closer to God and to remind them of the suffering of people who are less fortunate than themselves. Fasting is an exercise in self-control. As well as not eating, drinking or smoking, Muslims try to avoid bad actions, like talking about people behind their backs or using bad language. Ramadan is a time for people to work on being more patient, more tolerant and more mindful of the people around them. It is a moment to reflect and work on being better people.

Many Muslims also donate money to charities during the month, and a lot of Islamic charities organise food packs for people in poorer countries or refugee camps. Giving donations to charity, known as Zakat, is particularly important during the holy month, and so is prayer, meditation and reading the Qur'an.

How is the end of Ramadan celebrated?

Eid ul-Fitr marks the end of the month of fasting. There are many Eid traditions, mainly centred around family, food, generosity and festivities. On Eid ul-Fitr, Muslims wake up early and dress in their finest clothes to attend the Eid prayers. After prayers, they wish each other a happy Eid ('Eid Mubarak' in Arabic) before spending the rest of the day with their extended families, enjoying good food and sharing gifts with children and loved ones.

3: Valentine's Day (speak now 1 a/ lecture and writing 3)

- **Read this text and prepare yourself for class lecture**
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Valentine's Day is celebrated in many countries, but what are the differences between today's celebration and in the past? Read the text to find out some curious facts about the most romantic day of the year.

Valentine's Day is on 14 February, and it can seem as if the world is full of couples who are celebrating their love. Some couples might celebrate with dinner at a nice restaurant, flowers, chocolates or other presents. Some single people might put a post on social media about why they hate 'V-Day' or maybe they just avoid it completely. But it's impossible not to know that Valentine's is happening. And that's not surprising when over half of all Brits and Americans celebrate Valentine's in some way.

The price of love

For most of these romantic people, Valentine's Day means spending money. British people spend much less than Americans. The average Brit spends £28.45, while the average American spends \$221.34 (approximately £170.81). Interestingly, in the UK, all three adult generations are likely to buy something for Valentine's (around 68–69% of them). But in the USA, millennials spend slightly more than Generation X, and both spend almost a third more than baby-boomers. Across all generations, on both sides of the Atlantic, men spend more money than women.

The beginning of modern Valentine's Day

Today Valentine's is celebrated in Canada, Mexico, France, Denmark, Italy and Australia as well as the USA and England. But it's the USA where the celebration really became mass market, because of a woman called Esther Howland. She became known as the 'mother of Valentine's' after she created a successful business making and selling greetings cards in the 1840s. She got the idea from valentine cards from Europe that were decorated with lace and flowers and were very expensive. Then, in the early 1900s, two things happened that meant valentine cards became really popular: cheap printed cards were made by the greeting cards company, Hallmark, and the price of postage stamps fell.

Vinegar valentines

At about the same time as this, another kind of valentine card was popular. 'Vinegar valentines' were nasty, anonymous cards that people sent to someone they didn't like. This pre-social media way of trolling people was popular for a hundred years, but not many examples of the cards are in museums today. Museums have big collections of traditional valentine cards, but it's no surprise that not many people kept an unkind valentine card.

Further back in history

Valentine's Day has been celebrated in some way for 600 years. As far back as the 17th century, people gave cards or presents, but the very first valentine messages were written down in the 1400s. In 1415, the Duke of Orleans in France sent his wife a Valentine's Day letter while he was in prison in the Tower of London after the Battle of Agincourt. It is the earliest example of a written valentine message. However, the exact history of Valentine's Day is not known because there were three saints with the name Valentine. One story says that Valentine was a priest. He performed marriages at a time when the Emperor thought that single men were better soldiers than married men. The Emperor was so angry that he punished him with death. Another story says that Valentine helped Christians escape from Roman prisons. A third story says he sent a letter to a girl while he was in prison and signed it 'From your Valentine'.

Whichever story is true, the Catholic Church chose 14 February for St Valentine's Day in AD 270. They probably wanted to replace the pagan festival of Lupercalia on 15 February with the new Christian celebration.

4: Christmas (speak now 1 a/ lecture and writing 4)

- **Read this text and prepare yourself for class lecture**
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It's the time of year for Santa Claus, fairy lights and all the best pop songs. What are the essential elements of Christmas in the UK?

It's that time of the year for family, friends ... and cheesy Christmas music. For many people, Christmas is quite simply (as an old pop song says) 'the most wonderful time of the year'. For others, it is an exhausting exercise in bad taste. So what does a British Christmas involve?

Special days

Christmas is a celebration that lasts for several days. In the UK and many other countries, the main celebration takes place on Christmas Day (25 December). From the Christian origins of the holiday, this day marks the birth of Jesus Christ. Christmas Eve (24 December) is the time for last-minute shopping and preparations, present-wrapping and maybe a drink in the pub. Others will be at home preparing food for the big day or at a midnight church service to welcome Christmas Day. Boxing Day (26 December) is also a national holiday in the UK – a necessary one for many, to recover after eating too much the day before! Shops are usually open on Boxing Day and the big after-Christmas sales begin.

Decorations

From huge cities to tiny villages, the month of December sees buildings and streets covered in coloured lights, red ribbons and smiling Santa Claus faces. People also decorate their houses (and sometimes their gardens) for the Christmas period. The most famous decoration is, of course, the Christmas tree – a pine tree covered in little shiny decorations and fairy lights. Some people put a nativity scene in their house. This is a collection of little figures that represent the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.

Family and friends

Christmas is a time to be with the people you love. Often, this involves travelling to your hometown to be with parents, siblings, cousins, old friends, etc. For some households, it's the only time of the year when all the family is together. In the UK, this is usually a time for chats, cups of tea and watching Christmas films together. However, it can also lead to occasional family tension. But don't worry: there are plenty of impossibly cheerful pop songs to help everyone relax!

Food

Christmas meals vary across households, but the most common Christmas dinner in the UK is a roasted turkey with vegetables and potatoes. This may be accompanied by stuffing (made with bread, onions and herbs) and pigs in blankets (sausages wrapped in bacon or pastry). And, of course, delicious mince pies – little sweet cakes with fruit inside. This is, of course, fantastic if someone is cooking for you. If you're the cook, you may feel under a little pressure as the extended family start arriving for dinner!

Presents

Christmas is certainly the most wonderful time of the year for retailers! The days and weeks before Christmas are characterized by frantic shopping for presents. Many groups of friends or workmates take part in a 'Secret Santa' group. This is where each person buys a small present for one other person in the group, but the identity of the giver is never revealed. In many countries, Christmas Eve is a night for kids to go to bed early before their house is visited by Santa Claus, a magic man in a red suit who leaves presents for all the kids in the house.

Parties

Apart from dinner at home with family or friends, Christmas is also a time for parties. At school, children often do a Christmas theatre performance or sing Christmas carols in a concert, then have a party with sweets and cakes. For adults, most workplaces usually have their Christmas 'do'. This can be a dinner in a restaurant or just a few drinks in a bar. At workplace parties, many romances have started under the mistletoe, a special plant which people hang from the ceiling. If you meet somebody under the mistletoe, the tradition is to kiss that person.

However you celebrate Christmas, for many it's a time for having fun and spending time with the people you love. Plastic decorations and neon Santa Claus faces might be considered to be in bad taste by some people, but without them, it simply wouldn't be Christmas.

Speak now 1 b

1: Halloween (speak now 1 b/ lecture and writing 1)

- **Read this text and prepare yourself for class lecture**
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October 31 is Halloween and is now celebrated in many countries around the world, but do you know anything about the origins of this scary special day? Read the article and find out.

The origins of Halloween

If you think of Halloween, you probably think of scary carved pumpkins, all kinds of fancy dress and children asking for sweets. And if you think of a country that celebrates Halloween, you probably think of the United States first. Americans and Canadians have adopted Halloween in a big way, but Halloween traditions actually come from 16th-century Ireland, Scotland and England.

The tradition of Halloween on 31 October comes from the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain. Samhain was the Celtic New Year and they celebrated it on 1 November because that was the end of summer and harvest time (life) and the beginning of winter (death). It was also the time for ghosts to return to earth for a day. People lit a big fire, wore special clothes made of animal skin and hoped to be safe from the ghosts and the winter. In AD 609, the Catholic Church put the Christian celebration of All Saints Day on 1 November. In AD 1000, the church added All Souls Day on 2 November, and All Hallows Eve – or Halloween – moved to the night of the 31st.

Pumpkins

The Celts carved faces into vegetables like turnips, potatoes and squash (a pumpkin is a kind of squash) to scare the ghosts and other spirits and make them go away. It was sometimes called a jack-o'-lantern because of an Irish story about a man, Jack. He played a trick on the devil and then had to walk the earth for all time as a punishment. Irish people who came to live in the United States in the 1800s found pumpkins much easier to carve, and the tradition became the one we see today.

Fancy dress

The Celts were afraid of the ghosts that came on Samhain. If they went outside after dark, they covered their faces with masks. They hoped any ghosts they met would think they were ghosts too and would leave them alone. In early America, the Native Americans and the first Europeans

celebrated the end of the harvest, but not Halloween. When Irish people arrived, the harvest festival started to look more like Halloween and it became popular across the country. In the late 19th century, people tried to make Halloween less about ghosts and religion and more about celebrating the season with a party for neighbors and family. That's why Americans today wear all kinds of Halloween costumes and not just scary things like witches and ghosts like in other countries.

Trick or treat

This is another tradition that began in Europe, this time in England. When the church introduced All Souls Day, rich people gave poor people 'soul cakes', a small cake made with spices and raisins. It replaced the Celtic tradition of leaving food outside houses for the ghosts. 'Going a-souling' was popular in England for hundreds of years until about the 1930s. The Americans kept the tradition, but today children knock on people's doors and ask for sweets. Going trick or treating is so popular that a quarter of the sweets for the year in the United States are sold for this one day.

The rest of the world

Halloween has become the United States' second-biggest commercial festival after Christmas. Halloween is also celebrated in other countries, but it's not as big as in the United States, even in the countries where the traditions began. Mexico celebrates the Day of the Dead from 31 October to 2 November and some of its traditions, like giving gifts of sugar skulls, are starting to mix with Halloween. In this way, the celebration of Halloween continues to change as new traditions join the oldest of the Celtic ones.

2: International Day of Happiness (speak now 1 b/ lecture and writing 2)

- **Read this text and prepare yourself for class lecture**
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There's more behind the International Day of Happiness than you might think. Find out more by reading the article and answering the questions.

You might think the International Day of Happiness is a day to practice positive thinking or to give thanks for the things in your life that makes you happy. But it's actually a United Nations project which has a more serious purpose. The UN thinks happiness will only be for everyone when the people of the world are equal.

Why 20 March?

On this date (and also on 23 September), the center of the sun is directly above the Earth's equator, which is called an equinox. On the equinox, day and night last for almost equal time all over the Earth. The equinox is felt by everyone on the planet, which matches perfectly with the idea behind the Day of Happiness. Since 2013, the Day of Happiness has been celebrated in all 193 United Nations member states.

How did the idea start?

The idea goes back to 1972, when the King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, said that we should measure a country's progress by its happiness and not just how much it produces or how much money it makes. He called it Gross National Happiness (GNH). Again, it is more than just a nice idea. Bhutan developed a system to measure happiness based on things like people's psychological health, their general health, how they spend their time, where they live, their education and their environment. People in Bhutan answer about 300 questions, and the results are compared every year to measure progress. The government uses the results and the ideas behind GNH to make decisions for the country. Other places use shorter, similar versions of this kind of report, for example the city of Victoria in Canada and Seattle in the USA, as well as the state of Vermont, USA.

The man behind the International Day of Happiness

In 2011, a UN adviser called Jayme Illien suggested the idea of an international day to increase happiness. His plan was accepted by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in 2012. Jayme was born in Calcutta, India, and he became an orphan when he was a child. He was adopted by an American nurse, Anna Belle Illien. She travelled the world to help orphans and she took Jayme with her. He saw children like him, but who were not as lucky as him because they were often

escaping wars or they were very poor. He wanted to do something about it, so he worked in the areas of children's and human rights.

The World Happiness Report

The UN measures and compares the happiness of different countries in the World Happiness Report. It bases its report on social, economic and environmental well-being. The UN also sets goals for countries to achieve to increase happiness because it says happiness is a basic human right. Happiness should not be something people have because they are lucky to live in a place where they have basic things like peace, education and access to healthcare. If we agree that these basic things are human rights, then it is not a very big step to agree that happiness is a basic human right too.

3: International Women's Day (speak now 1 b/ lecture and writing 3)

- **Read this text and prepare yourself for class lecture**
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March 8 is International Women's Day, but the global campaigns for equal rights for women continue all year round. Read more about #IWD in this article.

International Women's Day on 8 March is a day to celebrate the social, economic and political achievements of women, reflect on progress and demand gender equality. For over a hundred years, International Women's Day has put the spotlight onto issues affecting women all over the world. Today, International Women's Day belongs to everyone who believes that women's rights are human rights.

Why do we need an International Women's Day?

Across the world, less than 15 per cent of the world's countries have a female leader. Only 24 per cent of senior managers are women and 25 per cent of companies have no female senior managers at all. Women do the lowest-paid jobs and earn less money for the same work. This difference in pay is called the gender pay gap, and for young women in many places, including Britain and America, the gap is getting worse. Women are also more likely to do most of the housework and childcare. All of these problems affect women of color even more than they do white women.

When it comes to healthcare and safety, women also face significant inequalities. An estimated 830 women a day die in childbirth. There are some shocking statistics for female murder too. Last year the UN found that 137 women a day were killed by their partner or former partner. Worldwide, over 50 per cent of female murders are committed by the victim's partner or family. When they have access to health education and care, women are also more likely to be ignored by doctors when they say they are in pain, and serious health problems are sometimes ignored for years.

The history of Women's Day

In 1908, 15,000 women in New York went on strike because of low pay and terrible conditions in the factories where they worked. The following year, the Socialist Party of America organized a National Women's Day, and one year after that, there was a conference in Copenhagen, Denmark, about equality and women's right to vote. In Europe, the idea grew and became International Women's Day (IWD) for the first time in 1911 and the United Nations declared 8 March International Women's Day in 1975.

What happens on 8 March?

In some countries, children and men give presents, flowers or cards to their mothers, wives, sisters or other women they know. But at the heart of International Women's Day lies women's rights. Across the world, there are protests and events to demand equality. Many women wear purple, a color worn by women who campaigned for women's right to vote. Recently, marches and protests have gained force thanks to the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements against sexual harassment. There is still a lot of work to be done for gender equality. But women's movements all over the world are ready to do that work and are gaining momentum.

4: New Year celebrations (speak now 1 b/ lecture and writing 4)

- **Read this text and prepare yourself for class lecture**
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On the night of 31 December and the morning of 1 January, people in many countries all over the world will celebrate the beginning of a new year. How will they celebrate and how did this tradition begin?

New year, old celebrations

There have been celebrations to mark the beginning of a new year for thousands of years. Sometimes these were simply an opportunity for people to eat, drink and have fun, but in some places the festivities were connected to the land or astronomical events. For example, in Egypt the beginning of the year coincided with when the River Nile flooded, and this normally happened when the star Sirius rose. The Persians and Phoenicians started their new year at the spring equinox (this is around 20 March when the Sun shines more or less directly on the equator and the length of the night and the day are almost the same).

The oldest celebration

The city of Babylon in ancient Mesopotamia was where the first New Year's celebrations were recorded about 4,000 years ago. The Babylonians held their celebrations on the first new moon after the spring equinox and called this festival Akitu (which comes from the word the Sumerians used for barley). Barley was cut in Mesopotamia in the spring, and during Akitu there was a different ritual on each of the 11 days that the celebration lasted. Statues of the gods were carried through the streets of the city, and in this way the Babylonians believed that their world had been cleaned to prepare for the New Year and a new spring.

Modern celebrations

In many cities all over the world, spectacular fireworks displays take place as soon as the clock passes midnight on 31 December. In recent years, Sydney in Australia has been the host to one of the first of these celebrations as New Year arrives there before most other major international cities. The display takes place in Sydney Harbor, with the Opera House and Harbor Bridge making it a stunning setting. Fireworks light up the skies in hundreds of cities as 12 midnight strikes around the globe.

Traditions that live on

There are a number of strange and interesting New Year's traditions around the world. In Scotland, New Year's Eve is called Hogmanay and 'first footing' remains a popular custom with people visiting friends' and neighbors' houses just after midnight. The first person who visits your house should bring a gift as this will mean good luck. In Spain, it is the custom to eat 12 grapes as the bells sound for midnight on 31 December. One grape is eaten at each sound of the bell and each grape is supposed to bring good luck for each month of the year ahead. In Brazil, Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela and some other Central and South American countries, people wear special underwear of different colors on New Year's Eve. Red is supposed to be good for bringing love in the New Year, while yellow is supposed to bring money.

Out with the old, in with the new

The New Year is a perfect time to make a change for the better. The tradition of making New Year's resolutions is more common in the western hemisphere but also exists in the eastern hemisphere. This tradition involves a person making a commitment to change an unwanted habit or behavior or setting a personal objective. Typical New Year's resolutions might be to give up smoking, eat healthier food, do more exercise, become more organized or laugh more – but really, a New Year's resolution can be almost anything. However, research suggests that many New Year's resolutions fail. Being realistic about the objectives you set and not making too many New Year's resolutions might help you to achieve success.

