

# Middle Eastern Festivals

## Islamic Festivals:

- **Moulid el-Nabi, Milad, Milad an-Nabi, or Mawlid un-Nabi (The Prophet's Birthday):** Prophet Muhammad (also Mohammed, Muhammed, Mahomet, and other variants) is the founder of Islam and is regarded by Muslims as the last messenger and prophet of God. The main purpose of Moulid el-Nabi gatherings is to remember, observe, discuss and celebrate the advent of the birth and teachings of the holy Prophet Muhammad.



- **Ramadan:** Ramadan is a celebration that takes place in the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, when the Quran (the central religious text of Islam) was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. Many people fast during the hours of daylight for the entire month. In Egypt, people decorate the streets and their houses with lanterns called *fanoos* or *fanoos*. The fanoos has become the symbol of Ramadan and is now found in other areas of the Middle East as well.

- **Eid el-Fitur, Eid ul-Fitr, or Id-Ul-Fitr (Feast of the Breaking the Fast):** Eid-ul-Fitr marks the breaking of the fast for Muslims at the end of Ramadan. The celebration lasts three days during which time families and friends get together to celebrate with good food and give to charity.



- **Chaand Raat (Night of the Moon):** Chaand Raat is the term used in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh for the eve of the Muslim festival of Eid el-Fitur. It is a time of celebration when families and friends gather in open areas at the end of the last day of Ramadan to spot the new moon, which signals the arrival of the Islamic month of Shawwal and the day of Eid. (See picture opposite.)

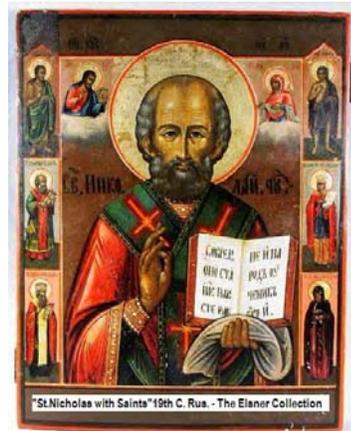
- **Eid el-Adha, Eid ul-Adha, or Eid el-Kbir (Feast of the Sacrifice):** The Festival of Sacrifice is the second most important feast in the Muslim calendar. The feast celebrates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son to prove his obedience to God.



- **Day of Ashura:** The Day of Ashura is not a festival, but rather a sad event for both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. Shi'a Muslims commemorate the death and sacrifice of Husayn ibn Ali, while Sunni Muslims observe the day Moses fasted to express gratitude to God for the liberation of Israelites from Egypt. In some countries other religious communities and cultures commemorate this event, including Armenians, Zoroastrians, Trinidadian, and Jamaicans.

## Christian Festivals:

- **Christmas:** Christmas is an annual holiday that marks the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. It is celebrated in different ways throughout the Middle East with planting seed in Lebanon, to bonfires in Syria, to fasting in Iran. A picture of the Christian saint, Saint Nickolas, a Turkish Bishop who had a reputation for secret gift-giving is seen opposite.
- **Epiphany:** Epiphany is a Christian feast celebrating the revelation of God to mankind in human form, in the person of Jesus. For Western Christians the feast primarily commemorates the coming of the Magi, while in the Middle East the feast celebrates the Baptism of Christ in the Jordan.



- **Palm Sunday:** Palm Sunday is also called the Sunday of Olives in the Middle East. The feast is celebrated the Sunday before Easter commemorating Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. According to tradition, the people waved palm branches and praised Jesus.
- **Easter:** Easter is the fundamental and most important festival of Christians in the Middle East, celebrating the resurrection of Jesus, which Christians believe occurred on the third day after his death by crucifixion. Orthodox Christians in the Middle East and in Greece paint eggs bright red to symbolize the blood of Christ.

## Jewish Festivals:

- **Passover (Pesach or Festival of Unleavened Bread):** Passover is the time when Jewish people remember how the people of Israel left slavery behind them when they left Egypt. It is a major eight-day festival.
- **Rosh Hashanah & Yom Kippur:** Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the High Holy Days celebrated by people of the Jewish religion. Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year. Ten days after Rosh Hashanah, people of the Jewish religion celebrate Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement).
- **Sukkot, Succoth, or Sukkos (Feast of Booths):** Sukkot is a harvest festival commemorating the 40 years that the Jews spent in the wilderness on the way from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. During the festival, some Jews build their own sukkah (hut) in the garden or at the synagogue.



- **Hanukkah or Chanukah (Festival of Lights):** Hanukkah is an eight-day Jewish holiday observed by the kindling of lights on each night of the holiday, marking the re-dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem after its desecration and commemorates the "miracle of the cruze of oil."

## Zoroastrian Festivals:

- **Nowruz (New Day):** Nowruz is celebrated on the first day of spring and marks the beginning of a new year. Many important Zoroastrian festivals are in celebration of nature: new year on the first day of spring, the water festival in summer, the autumn festival at the end of the season, and the mid-winter fire festival. Although few people practice Zoroastrianism today, some of the religious holidays have become secular holidays as well.



- **Sadeh or Jashn-e Sadeh (Festival of Fire):** Sadeh is a mid- winter festival that was celebrated with grandeur and magnificence in ancient Iran. It was a festivity to honor fire and to defeat the forces of darkness, frost, and cold. Camel thorns from a common desert shrub are gathered to celebrate. A picture of the shrub is on the previous page.
- **Jashn-e Mihragān (Festival of Mihr):** The Festival of Mihr is a day of thanksgiving dedicated to the highest Angel, Mithra, an important deity or divine concept in Zoroastrianism and later Persian mythology and culture.



- **Yaldā or Shab-e Chelle (Winter Solstice):** Yaldā is celebrated on the eve of the first day of the winter, which falls on the Winter Solstice. It celebrates the birth of Sun god Mithra. Different kinds of dried fruits, nuts, seeds and fresh winter fruits are consumed. (See the picture opposite.)

- **Jashn-e Tiragan (The Festival of Tiragan):** Jashn-e Tiragan is a day dedicated to Tishtrya and is a rain festival observed in July with the hope of increasing the harvest and countering drought.

## Secular Festivals:

- **Sham el-Nessim (Smelling the Breeze):** This Egyptian festival marks the beginning of spring and literally means “smelling the breeze.” Sham el-Nessim is celebrated by both Christians and Muslims so it is considered a national more than a religious festival.

- **The International Festival of the Sahara:** In Douz, Tunisia, each year people celebrate nomadic ways of life and their traditions. The features of the festival include camel marathons, dances, singing, poetry, *fantasia* (galloping Arab horses ridden by daring riders), a Bedouin marriage, and *sloughi* (desert hunting dog—see picture) catching rabbits.



- **Nowrūz or Now Ruz (Iranian New Year):** Nowrūz is the traditional Iranian new year holiday celebrated in Iran, Northern Iraq, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Albania, Georgia, the countries of Central Asia such as Turkmenistan, Tajikistan,

Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, as well as among various other Iranian and Turkic people in Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, India, Northwestern China, the Caucasus, the Crimea, and the Balkans.

The festival marks the first day of spring and the beginning of the New Year and traditionally lasts for thirteen days. It is celebrated by all people regardless of their religion on the vernal equinox, the beginning of spring in the northern hemisphere. The celebrations begin with spring house cleaning and an intricate dinner, including seven items whose names begin with the letter “S.”



- **Nowruz in Afghanistan:** In Afghanistan, Nowruz is celebrated throughout the country and is connected to the abundant red tulips that grow wild there. Games called buzkashi (a team sport played on horseback). are held and picnics go on until late at night, with music and dancing in the parks and open grounds around shrines.

- **Nowruz Celebrations by Kurds:** The Kurds (an ethnic group considered to be indigenous to a region often referred to as Kurdistan, an area which includes parts of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey) celebrate Nowruz between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of March. To celebrate Kurds gather in open areas, mostly outside the cities, to welcome spring.



- **Hala Festival:** The Hala February festival is an annual event that takes place in Kuwait during the spring season. It is a month long celebration when the dry sands of the desert bloom into a green carpet covered with blossoming, colorful flora.
- **Georgian Keipi or Supra:** Part of the social culture of the peoples of Georgia is a banquet feast called the keipi. In ancient times, a keipi feast would be held in the spring for the entire village to attend, involving a toastmaster and a feast. Oftentimes folk dances are also a part of the keipi celebration.



- **Basant, Jashan-e Baharaan, or Basant Panchami (Spring Festival):** Basant is another festival that takes place in the spring to celebrate the end of winter. In Pakistan and throughout Southern Asia, people of all religious backgrounds observe this spring tradition. Kite flying is particularly important. Throughout the festival, kite flying competitions take place all over the city's rooftops.