

# **Springtime, the Persian New Year, and a few other not-so-trivial facts about Iran**

The First Day of Spring marks a new year for Iran and Persians all around the world. This festive day is called Norooz, the Persian New Year. Norooz literally means ‘new-day’. It is the most significant holiday in the calendar. This day is celebrated based on the sun’s movement during the equinox, when it crosses the celestial equator, ending winter and beginning spring.

In the spirit of this holiday I would like to take the opportunity and share with you some historical and cultural facts about Iran through a handful of frequently asked questions about that country. I hope it will serve as a practical guide and a quick reference for you. The following is from an oral presentation and for that reason it is intentionally written in casual context.

## ***“What is the difference between Iran and Persia?”***

Nothing! The region known as Iran today was called Persia for a couple of thousand years prior to WWII. Around that time of global war, the then King of Persia, Reza Shah, decided to lean towards the wrong side. Hitler reminded the Shah that Persians are the root of Aryan people and thus it made sense to unite against the Semites and all those who support them. Incidentally, the term Semite historically in Persian refers to Arabs as well as Jews. The Shah liked the idea so much that he changed the country’s name from Persia to its distant historic name, Iran. It is said that he did this for multiple reasons, the main one being that Persians within their country have long called it Iran (bear in mind that the name Iran means the land of Aryans). The connotation that the word “Aryan” evokes today is born out of unscientific and political ideas of some in nineteenth century Europe which eventually mushroomed into misguided movements, horrific atrocities and world tragedies in modern times. Well, I hope you are aware that the Nazis lost the war - awesome for the free world, but not so for the king of Iran. Reza Shah was exiled to the Mauritius Island to die in solitude. At about the same time, the United Nations was beginning to take shape. The country’s new name, Iran, stayed. But remember that until the 1930’s the region was mostly known as Persia.

Now, I am not here to recite a lengthy historical book, therefore some may argue with above since I skipped a lot of minutia. Nonetheless, I gave you the punch lines in that country’s 3,000 year history. In short, you are not wrong to say either Iran or Persia. Other nations and regions, especially those with long histories, have two names; for example, Holland & Netherlands.

### ***“Is the language spoken in Iran called Persian or Farsi?”***

The dilemma of Persian vs. Farsi is much simpler than people make it out to be. I can highlight this through somewhat of an amusing personal story. I was recently dragged to a party instead of what I truly wanted to do; which was to recline on my couch, hug a bag of Doritos and watch ESPN highlights. While at the party I was introduced to another friendly guest. Our conversation led to where we each came from. He then asked “Ah, you speak Farsi?” to which I timidly replied “Yes.” He grinned with self admiration for knowing this. Another guest joined us and the conversation was held on my nation of origin. The second guest asked “Say, what do people speak in Iran?” and I replied “Persian.” Then the first guest said with puzzlement and a tone of betrayal “You mean Farsi!” I shrugged my shoulders and said “Sure.” Then the three of us exchanged a few seconds of confusing and uncomfortable glances at each other before I excused myself to get another drink and more finger foods, hoping to avoid any further debate.

The moral of the story is that you probably don’t approach a French guy at your party and say “Hi, do you speak Français?” or meet someone from Germany and ask “Hey, do you speak Deutsch?” No! You would plainly ask if they spoke French, or Spanish, or Russian, or whatever you call that language in English since you are speaking English to them. Now, if you were conversing in French you could ask “Parlez vous Francais?”, or if speaking Spanish, you could ask “Hablas Espanol?” Therefore, if you happen to be speaking in Persian, then while you speak it, you can refer to it as “Farsi.” Capish? (That’s I-talian, by the way)

### **“What is the main religion in Iran?”**

Islam is the main religion. Followers of Islam are called Muslims. There are two main sects in Islam, one is Suni and the other is Shia. This is comparable to the two main sects in Christianity: Catholicism and Protestants. Majority of Muslims in Iran are Shia – well over 80%. But outside of Iran Shia is a minority religion in Islam (just 10%). Persians had a lot to do with this split in Islam and the promotion of Shia. I don’t want to be sacrilegious here and upset any zealots, or worst of all bore you, but this had a lot to do with the fact that Persians did not want to be under Arab rule and taxation when they were conquered in 633AD. Sidestepping any religious dogma, this clearly worked in Iran’s advantage historically, sociopolitically and culturally speaking - I am not sure this is still the case now since the 1979 Revolution. Some say that was no revolution, but an “evolutionary U-turn!” Time will tell.

## **“Is it the Persian Gulf or the Arabian Gulf?”**

There is no such thing as the Arabian Gulf. There is the *Arabian Sea*. And then there is the *Persian Gulf*. Don't just call it “The Gulf” either. I mean, which gulf are you referring to? I may think you are going to vacation in Florida or Cancun and are referring to the Gulf of Mexico! It's called the Persian Gulf. It has always been called the Persian Gulf and calling it anything else is at best an error in one's knowledge of world geography.

## **“What foods do Persians eat?”**

Persians eat a lot of food that is stew based with long grain rice (more similar to Indian cuisine than other Middle Eastern foods but not nearly as spicy and seldom vegetarian). I never had hummus until I got to America. I figured out what tabouli is when I was invited to have dinner with a Lebanese family whom I had met when I was at college in West Virginia. And, please stop talking to me about the health benefits of couscous. Persians don't eat couscous, and if or when we do, we definitely don't call it that, because couscous is a slang term not appropriate for a PG rated discourse like this one.

## **“Are there ‘gays’ in Iran?”**

Despite Iran's government and its leaders' beliefs, there are gays in Iran. It's a life style the Islamic Republic does not look too fondly upon (penalty for homosexual acts is capital punishment). Little extreme, I know! In short, the government would rather believe that gays and lesbians don't exist, let alone discuss their rights. The Mullahs should watch a few episodes of *Shahs of Sunset* and they'll see a live, full color, completely flamboyant, Iranian gay man. I don't recommend watching this show to most people. It's too painful! But then again, I think any reality show is too painful, waste of your time, and bad for your brain. You are better off watching ESPN.

## **“What should I do when I see a Persian next time?”**

Now if you happen to run into any Persians around town, in business meetings, or at a party, you can be on top of your game and stay Persian savvy, or Iranian savvy - either way you call it, you won't be wrong. Give that Persian a big hug. Persians are friendly people notwithstanding the Islamic Republic's endless list of severe shortcomings. Also, don't forget to wish him/her a Happy New Year!

**In closing:**

According to census data an estimated one million Iranians live in the U.S. (interestingly, half live in L.A. area). The U.S. is made up of people from all corners of the world, and it gives us an opportunity to learn a lot from each other and grow. This growth in turn makes us a much stronger country. U.S.A is a diverse nation made of individuals from various national origins, races, ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations, languages, education and abilities. Nonetheless, the Pledge of Allegiance, as it is recited daily at our schools, declares that we are “one Nation under God”. I am immensely grateful for that. I will end on this note and wish you all an awesome Spring! Keep it safe, yet exciting!

E Pluribus Unum —

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