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Tradition and resistance

The Newroz festival marks the beginning of the new year and is a symbol of the struggle for self-determination – especially in Kurdistan



The Newroz festival is celebrated annually on March 20th or 21st by many peoples in the Middle East. For Tajiks, Persians, Afghans, and Uzbeks, it primarily marks the beginning of spring. But for the Kurds, it is much more than that—it is a symbol of resistance, freedom, and the struggle for self-determination. While the celebrations began in a free atmosphere in some regions of Kurdistan, in others they are suppressed or at least tightly controlled.



In Western Kurdistan, the region in northeastern Syria known as Rojava, Newroz could be celebrated freely this year under Kurdish self-rule. Cities such as Qamishli, Derik, Afrin, and Hasakah have been the scene of exuberant celebrations, with thousands of people marching through the streets with burning torches in recent days. In the years leading up to the declaration of self-rule in 2012, Newroz celebrations were strictly forbidden here. Many Kurds were arrested for simply participating in the festivities. But the situation has changed since then. People can now chant slogans for freedom and democracy while lighting the traditional Newroz fire.



In Northern Kurdistan (Bakur), which is under Turkish rule, Newroz this year is marked by hope. The celebrations take place just three weeks after the message of Abdullah Öcalan. The leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), imprisoned on the Mediterranean island of İmralı, called for reconciliation between Turks and Kurds, an end to the armed struggle, and the dissolution of the PKK. Hundreds of thousands of people gathered in cities such as Diyarbakır (Amed), Van (Wan), and Hakkâri (Kolemêrg). They demanded democratic reforms, the release of Öcalan, and equal rights for Kurds. In Amed and Van, people carrying pictures of Öcalan or PKK symbols were prevented from participating in the celebrations. Despite these restrictions, many managed to incorporate symbols of the Kurdish resistance into the events.



In Eastern Kurdistan (Rojhilat), which is controlled by Iran, the Newroz festival is overshadowed by government restrictions. Iranian intelligence had warned in advance that khaki clothing, considered a symbol of the Kurdish resistance, was prohibited. However, Kurdish activists refused to comply with these regulations. Spontaneous celebrations were organized in cities such as Urmia (Ûrmiye), Oshnaviyeh (Şino), Ilam, Kermanshah (Kirmaşan), and Sanandaj (Sine), despite the authorities' revocation of official permits. During these celebrations, people chanted slogans such as "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" ("Woman, Life, Freedom"), "We destroy colonialism," and "Kurdistan, the grave of the fascists." Security forces responded with force and arrested at least 15 people – including two sisters, Evîn and Sarya Ehmedî, in Urmia on Wednesday. According to *Roj News*, their whereabouts are unknown.

In the Kurdistan Autonomous Region of Iraq (Bashur), where Kurds enjoy federal autonomy, the celebrations proceeded largely undisturbed. The town of Akre in Dahuk Province once again became the center of the largest Newroz celebration in Southern Kurdistan. More than 100,000 people gathered here to celebrate. The traditional Newroz fire was lit on mountaintops, while people expressed solidarity with the Kurds in Turkey and Iran. Until the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, celebrations here were also severely restricted.

While Newroz could be celebrated freely in some regions of Kurdistan, the festivities were subject to severe restrictions in others. But one thing remains clear: despite all the repression, the Kurds will not let their New Year celebrations be taken away from them. With torches in hand and slogans on their lips, they send a message of hope every year – to their oppressors, but also to the world.