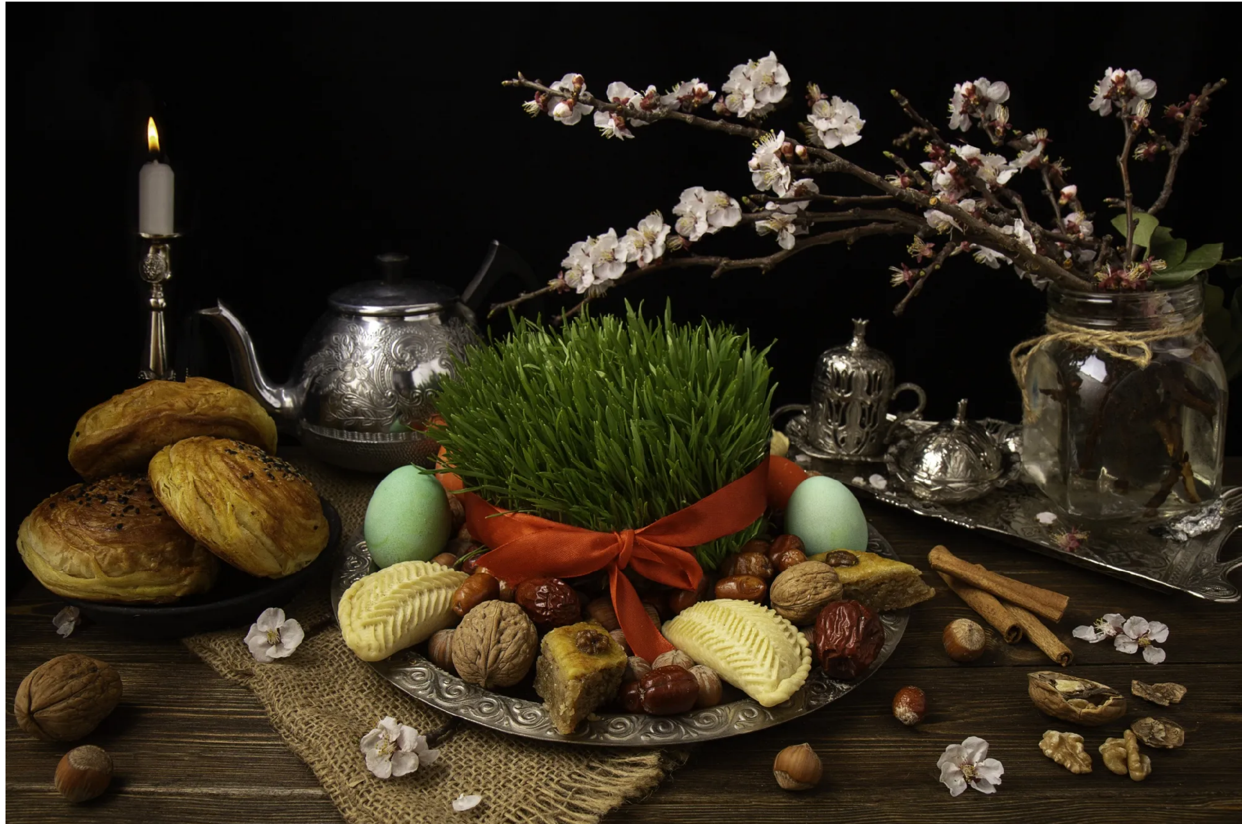
Weekend Essay

Iran Is the Place I Call Home, Yet It's Somewhere I've Never Been

For many in the Iranian diaspora, the war has intensified a familiar tension: feeling deeply tied to a land they haven't visited.



A table set with typical Nowruz items. *Photographer: Leyla Sadirkhanly/Getty Images*

By Tala Ahmadi
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Growing up, the highlight of Nowruz wasn't the Persian new year rituals, the food or even the dancing. It was the moment later in the evening when tea cups were filled, plates pushed aside and everyone settled around the table as the stories began. My grandmother, my mother and other relatives would reminisce about their lives in Iran – the streets they grew up on, the markets where they bought their groceries and the nearby towns they'd visit for

weekends away. There were animated debates and friendly interruptions. The room quickly filled with laughter, sighs and long, nostalgic pauses.

Listening to them describing their vivid memories of Iran, it always felt as though I knew the country intimately – every street, every sound, every smell. But when people ask if I've ever visited, the answer is no: I have never set foot in the country I feel most connected to.

Every year, Nowruz – a 13-day celebration that begins this year on March 20 – brought Iran and its traditions into our home in the UK, thousands of miles away. There was the hoovering and polishing each corner for *khaneh tekani*, the spring-cleaning ritual meant to welcome positivity, which made the house gleam; arranging the *haft-sin* table (the symbolic spread of seven items, each beginning with the letter "s"); stuffing ourselves with *sabzi polo ba mahi* (herbed rice and fish); and ending the nights with music and dancing.

Iranian culture was always present in my life, shaping how I grew up and how I proudly identify. It lived in the food my family ate. I came home from school to the smell of *tahdig* (crispy rice) sizzling on the stove, the golden crust crackling as it cooked. Meals were almost always stained by the orange sunburst of saffron, its scent lingering in the kitchen. There were endless kebabs, slow-cooked stews that simmered for hours and lavashak (sour fruit leather), which on some nights my sister and I overindulged in until we started feeling nauseous.

It lived throughout our home, where Persian carpets lined the living room floor, bought by my mother from the bazaars in Tehran when she lived in Iran. Ornate serving trays rested on the coffee table, ready to be filled with tea glasses and sweets whenever guests arrived. Family photos were held fast inside Persian marquetry picture frames, while small evil-eye amulets hung quietly in the corners of the house, placed there to ward off bad luck.

Nowruz

Preview Tala Ahmadi

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1	Saghi Hayedeh	04:04
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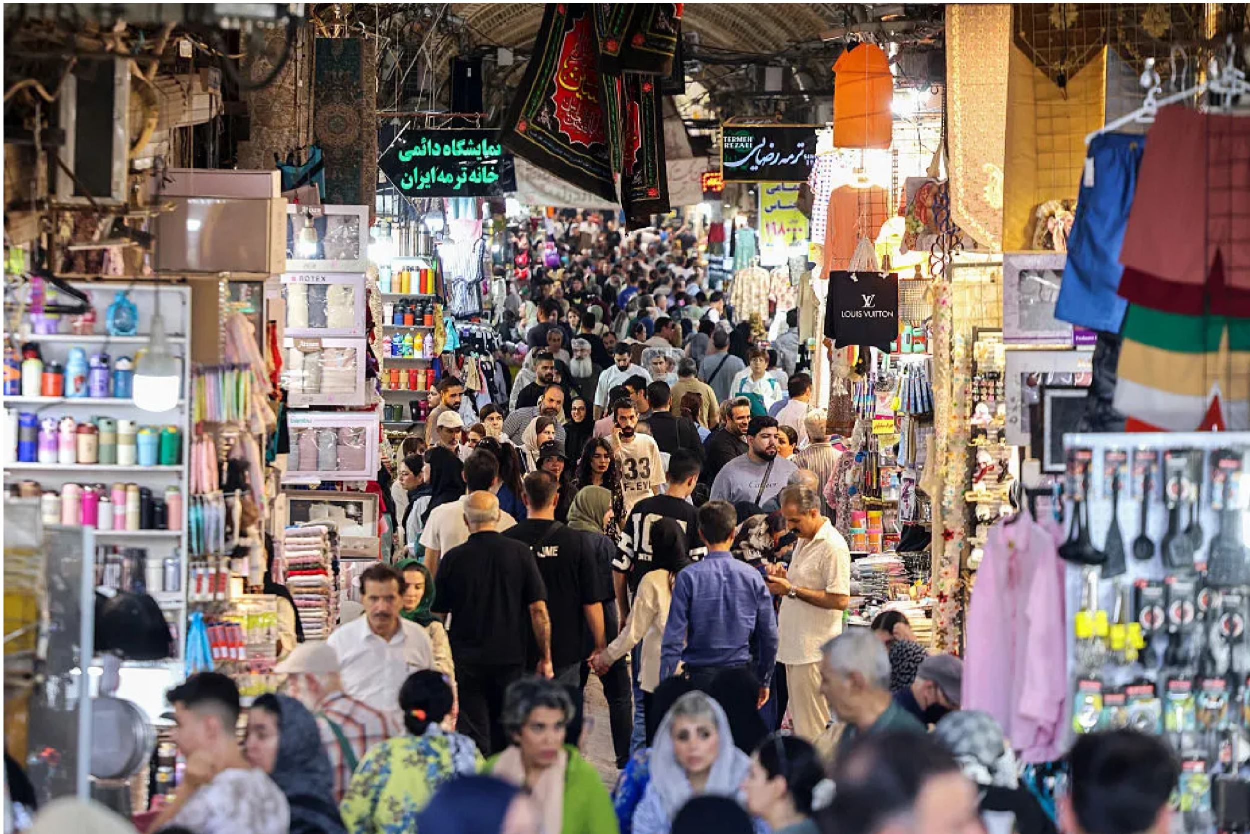
It also lived in the language around me, in the soft sounds of Farsi that filled our home, in the voices of Googoosh, Hayedeh, and Dariush played on repeat through our speakers, and in the verses of Rumi and Hafez recited by relatives at the end of family gatherings.

"Practices, traditions that are passed down become heightened in importance when you're living abroad," says Assef Ashraf, an associate professor in the faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern studies at the University of Cambridge. "If you can't go to a place, what connects you to it are stories and memories."

Between Memory and Experience

Although Iranian culture has always been in my life through food, objects and language, the country itself has remained physically out of reach. When I hear friends whose parents immigrated from other countries talk about traveling to their ancestral homelands, reuniting with family, having food there that tastes so much better or returning with suitcases full of souvenirs, it feels strangely distant. That kind of return has never been available to me.

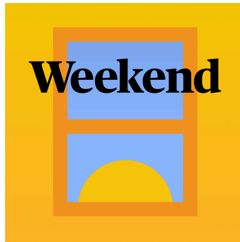
I have always wanted to go to Iran, but circumstances beyond my control have put that out of reach. A mix of factors were to blame: There were concerns for my safety as a young woman and worries about navigating cultural differences. There were also practical barriers, such as the difficulty of obtaining a visa or potential future complications when traveling abroad – including any attempt to enter the US – and the increased likelihood of additional scrutiny and questioning at borders. It was never as simple as booking a ticket, and the opportunity to visit was repeatedly postponed.



Tehran's Grand Bazaar is hundreds of years old and contains long, sprawling corridors of commerce. *Photographer: Atta Kenare/AFP/Getty Images*

So much of my life has been shaped by longing, by imagining what it would feel like to finally visit. I've pictured stepping into relatives' homes I've heard so much about, entering spaces that have only ever existed for me through stories. I've imagined wandering through the Grand Bazaar, losing myself in its noise and color. I've read about the Nasir al-Mulk Mosque in Shiraz, picturing light filtering through its stained glass, and I've envisioned standing in Naqsh-e Jahan Square in Isfahan, surrounded by its vastness. I've even found myself wanting to be able to complain about the traffic, the heat or the way a quick trip to the shop can stretch into hours of conversation.

This kind of distancing, of knowing a place so personally yet never having known it firsthand, is a feeling many in the Iranian diaspora understand: the push and pull between inherited memory and lived experience.



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That distance becomes even more pronounced in moments of crisis. As war in Iran fills the headlines, it brings a surge of emotions many second-generation immigrants recognize: You are physically removed yet emotionally pulled. Each news story carries a quiet heaviness; each headline settles and lingers. You find yourself refreshing the same pages over and over, searching for familiar place names, for anything that might offer clarity or even the smallest sense of relief.

For many, this experience is shared. "It's extremely emotional – I've spent days hysterically crying," says Yasmine Layla Shahlavi, 39, a real estate agent who's lived most of her life in Canada but whose family is based in Tehran and in Iran's north. "It feels like you have a chokehold on you all the time, because your family is there."

The war feels immediate, even from afar. Its reality seeps through during phone calls to family, its quiet dread fills the time spent waiting for delayed replies to messages from those inside Iran. There are restless nights spent tracking which areas have been affected by bombings. But distance also imparts a sense of helplessness as we watch events unfold. All the while, we hold on to hope as a way of staying connected to those who cannot be reached. In my work as a journalist, I have found a small measure of relief in contributing to coverage, helping to shed light on what is happening and keeping the belief that making these stories visible is, in itself, a way of maintaining that connection.

It's well past midnight now in the Nowruz of my memory, and, as usual, the stories have softened into silence, the tea is long since finished, and the plates have been cleared after one last round of food. One by one, everyone begins to gather their things to leave. No one leaves quickly. Relatives dawdle

in drawn-out goodbyes, each one ending with the same promise – to celebrate together again next year.

But in the real world, this year feels different. This year, Nowruz – which is, at its heart, a celebration of renewal, of family, of connection – arrives more quietly. Many of us in the diaspora won't be celebrating as we usually would: There will be no large gatherings, no tables filled with food, no music, no dancing. This year, the possibility of finally visiting home feels further away than it ever has been before.

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