

Acknowledgments

One day, Nasreddin Hodja was visiting Konya. A man stopped him as he strolled through the city. “Excuse me, uncle, do you know what day of month it is?” the man asked.

“How should I know?” replied Hodja, “I’m not from around here.”

The jocular character Nasreddin Hodja is one of the countless cultural touchpoints the diverse peoples of Türkiye and Iran share, along with others in West Asia and North Africa. Being Turkish and doing research on Iran, I felt a bit like Hodja, famously from Akşehir, losing his bearings in the new environment of Konya. I had to learn a whole new language (Persian) to write this book! I couldn’t have done so without support from the Center for the Study of Languages and Cultures and the Institute for Scholarship in the Arts at the University of Notre Dame.

But, perhaps, if Hodja had stayed a bit longer in Konya – incidentally, the final resting place of another shared cultural treasure, Rumi – he would have realized, as I did, that a place and people can be both entirely foreign and delightfully familiar. I owe that realization to the Iranians who taught me Persian and hosted me during my visits to Tehran and Shiraz: Elham, Heeva, Fareeda, along with my research assistants, Leila Seyedghasem, Parisa Akbari, and Niloofar Adnani, and their families. Thanks to them, being in Iran and communicating in Persian never felt like anything other than a homecoming, even as I stumbled over my words and guessed desperately at those unwritten vowels.

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