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The Symbolic Struggle for the Arab Spring: Political Fields and Foreign Policy in the Middle East

By Francesco D’Alema

This thesis has been submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for a Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Politics and International Relations at the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh

2022
I declare that this thesis is of my own composition, based on my own work and on my research, and that it has not been submitted for any other degree.

Francesco D’Alema
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. 6

List of Acronyms ...................................................................................................................... 8

Abstract .................................................................................................................................... 9

Lay Summary ............................................................................................................................. 11

Introduction ............................................................................................................................... 14

Theorising Middle East politics during the Arab Spring .............................................................. 18

A new chapter in the Saudi Arabia–Iran rivalry? Systemic approaches to Middle East politics during the Arab Spring ................................................................................................................. 21

Realist approaches and domestic variables ................................................................................. 25

Domestic politics and ideational constructs .............................................................................. 28

Historical materialism, historical sociology and the domestic power struggles: hegemonic classes, strategies of reproduction and foreign policy behaviour ....................................................... 33

Bourdieu’s contribution ............................................................................................................. 37

Methodology ............................................................................................................................... 39

Ontological and epistemological foundations of the research ..................................................... 39

Data collection and analysis ...................................................................................................... 42

Structure of the thesis ................................................................................................................ 43

Chapter 1 Theoretical framework: Outline of a Bourdieusian approach to foreign policy .......... 47

1.1 Bourdieu’s field theory and the political field ...................................................................... 48

1.1.1 Bourdieu’s core concepts ............................................................................................... 48

1.1.2 Introducing the political field ....................................................................................... 51

1.2 Bourdieu and the international: the double game ............................................................... 56

1.3 Conceptualising the struggles for change and continuity in a field-theoretic approach: The doxic struggle for the Arab Spring ................................................................................................. 63

1.3.1 Change through Bourdieu: The case of hysteresis ....................................................... 63

1.3.2 Change in the structure: Doxic battle ........................................................................... 66

1.4 Conclusions ......................................................................................................................... 69

Chapter 2 Genesis and composition of the political field and the making of foreign policy behaviour ........ 70

2.1 The “Turkish model” revisited: The roots of the religious-democratic principle of vision and division .... 72

2.1.1 The genesis of the political field in Turkey .................................................................... 72

2.1.2 The historical trajectory of the AKP ............................................................................ 75

2.2. Assessing the political, religious and symbolic roots of the Iranian foreign policy discourse: The political field of the Islamic Republic and the anti-imperialist principle ........................................................................ 83

2.2.1 Khomeini and the genesis of the Iranian political field .................................................. 83

2.2.2 The structure of the Iranian political field ..................................................................... 89

2.3. The Saudi variant ............................................................................................................ 94

2.3.1 Symbolic and political order: The role of religious discourses in the genesis of the Saudi political field .............................................................................................................................. 95

2.3.2 The Saudi variant of political struggle ......................................................................... 98
2.4. Conclusions ..................................................................................................................................................103

Chapter 3 Turkey, Iran and the symbolic struggle for the Arab Spring .............................................................106

3.1 The political field and the international: Turkey, Iran and the double game in the Middle East ...............109
   3.1.1 The rise of the Turkish model discourse: The AKP’s democratic-religious principle in the changing
   Middle East ................................................................................................................................................110
   3.1.2 The Iranian political field at the dawn of the symbolic struggle .........................................................114
3.2 The Arab Spring and the Turkish–Iranian competition ..............................................................................118
   3.2.1 The AKP’s democratic-religious principle: A new understanding of the Turkish model discourse during
   the Arab Spring ........................................................................................................................................119
   3.2.2 The Iranian political field in the doxic battle .....................................................................................124
3.3 Turkish–Iranian competition and the evolution of post-revolutionary political fields ..............................129
3.4 Conclusions ................................................................................................................................................138

Chapter 4 The Middle East political space and the logic of counterrevolution: The Saudi, Turkish and Iranian
political fields between the Egyptian coup d’état and the Syrian civil war ..................................................141

4.1 Contextualising Saudi and Turkish position towards the Egyptian counterrevolution ............................142
   4.1.1 The logic of the counterrevolution: Symbolic order, political stability and the Saudi response to the
   rise of the Muslim Brotherhood ..............................................................................................................144
   4.1.2 The Arab Spring and the internal political–religious debate in Saudi Arabia ......................................147
   4.1.3 Gezi Park and the crisis of Erdoğan’s domestic hegemony ................................................................152
4.2 The coup in Egypt and the Middle East political space ..............................................................................155
4.3 The Syrian uprising and strategies of political and symbolic capital accumulation ..................................162
   4.3.1 The Saudi field of power and the Syrian uprising ..........................................................................164
   4.3.2 The end of the “Iranian model”: The readjustment of the Iranian position in the Middle East political
   space and new developments in the Iranian political field .....................................................................167
   4.3.3 The AKP and the sectarianisation of the regional political discourse ..............................................169
4.4 Conclusions ................................................................................................................................................172

Chapter 5 The Turkish, Iranian and Saudi political fields after the Arab Spring .............................................175

5.1 The reconfiguration of the AKP’s habitus: From the democratic-religious principle to a religious-
nationalist one .....................................................................................................................................................177
   5.1.1 The Kurdish question and the changing strategies in the national political field and in the region . 177
   5.1.2 The rise of the religious-nationalist principle: The restructuring of the political field and the new AKP
   foreign policy discourse ...........................................................................................................................179
5.2 The Iranian political field after the Arab Spring ......................................................................................183
   5.2.1 The fall of the neoconservatives ........................................................................................................184
   5.2.2 The limits of the Rouhani presidency in the political field ...............................................................186
5.3 The rise of MBS and the nationalist principle of vision in the Saudi political field and in the Middle East
..................................................................................................................................................................190
5.4 Conclusions: The regional political space after the Arab Spring ............................................................196

Conclusions ..................................................................................................................................................198

Key findings ..................................................................................................................................................200

Future research .............................................................................................................................................207

Bibliography ....................................................................................................................................................209
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List of Acronyms

AKP      Justice and Development Party (Turkey)- Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi
ANAP     Motherland Party-Anavatan Partisi
CHP      Republican People’s Party -Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi
FEI      Fedayeen el-Islam
FJP      Freedom and Justice Party
GCC      Gulf Cooperation Council
HDP      Peoples’ Democratic Party- Halkların Demokratik Partisi
IR       International Relations
IRGC     Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp
KDP      Kurdistan Democratic Party
KNC      Kurdistan National Council
KRG      Kurdistan Regional Government
MBS      Mohammed bin Salman
MHP      Party of the Nationalist Movement-Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi
PJD      Justice and Development Party (Morocco) - Parti de la Justice et du Développement
PKK      Kurdistan Workers’ Party- Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê
PYD/YPG  Democratic Union Party/People’s Defence Units - Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat/Yekîneyên Parastina Gel
RP       Welfare Party -- Refah Partisi
UAE      United Arab Emirates
Abstract

In the past decades, the Middle East has attracted the attention of media and researchers all over the world. The balance of power is fluid, state borders are fragile, and national identities are being contested. Thus, the study of the regional political dynamics has always been a stimulating challenge for International Relations (IR) scholars, making the Middle East a potential “laboratory” for testing the alleged universality of IR theories. This debate has been enriched by the outbreak of the Arab Spring. The impact of the regional upheavals on the international relations of the Middle East has been a source of intense debate within the discipline. Surely, these developments, by questioning state-society relations, creating new cleavages and reinforcing old ones, have affected the regional status quo. This thesis analyses the changes in regional politics through the analysis of foreign policy behaviour of three key states: Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The governments of these three states reacted differently to the unfold of the events. First, the ruling Justice and Development Party in Turkey supported the uprisings and the following rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in the name of “democracy”. Moreover, it promoted its own political experience (the so-called “Turkish model”) as a model for the emerging democracies in the Arab world. This strategy was adopted even at the expense of Turkey’s good relations with its Arab neighbours (including Syria). On its part, the Iranian regime initially encouraged the overthrown of authoritarian regimes in the region, framing the regional movement as a continuation of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. However, this enthusiastic rhetoric dissipated when the revolutionary wind hit Syria. Finally, the Saudi regime, initially silent and concerned with its own internal problems and contestations, supported the restoration of the Ancien Régime in Egypt in the name of ‘political stability’ and ‘fight against terror’, while encouraging a sectarian mobilisation against Bashar al-Assad in Syria.
In order to make sense of this complex picture, this thesis suggests that the foreign policy behaviour of these countries was influenced by domestic considerations, namely the political struggles within their respective political spheres. This consideration emphasises the need to re-evaluate the relationship between foreign policy, internal political struggles and the making of Middle East regional politics, both empirically and theoretically. In doing so, this thesis builds on the works of Pierre Bourdieu. In particular, it deploys Bourdieu’s concepts of political field, political capital and principle of vision and division, as well the Bourdieu-inspired concept of doxic battles. Through these theoretical lens, this work argues that foreign policy discourses can be traced to the position of foreign policy actors within internal political struggles. In other words, as the Arab Spring paved the way for a redefinition of principles of governance and of the relationship between politics and religion in Middle East politics, political agents in Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia responded by mobilising symbolic resources that were the products of their own historical experiences in their respective national political arenas. Moreover, building upon a Bourdieu-inspired conceptualisation of the international realms, and of its relations with domestic politics, this thesis provides an analysis in how the foreign policy discourses in Turkey, Iranian and Saudi Arabia have changed since the Arab Spring, thus trying to assess the influence of the regional uprising in the strategies of reproduction of dominant political groups.
Lay Summary

In the past decades, the Middle East has attracted the attention of media and researchers all over the world. The balance of power is fluid, state borders are fragile, and national identities are being contested. Thus, the study of the regional political dynamics has always been a stimulating challenge for International Relations (IR) scholars, making the Middle East a potential “laboratory” for testing the alleged universality of IR theories. This debate has been enriched by the outbreak of the Arab Spring, which strongly questions state-society relations and the status quo in the regional system, creating new cleavages and reinforcing old ones. In this context, this thesis addresses the foreign policies of three main regional power—namely Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia—during the uprisings. The choice of the case studies reflects these three countries’ considerable relative capabilities, regional aspirations, and culture-historical significance, which make their foreign policies crucial in shaping the (in)stability of the Middle Eastern regional system. The relevance of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia is particularly evident during the Arab Spring, where regional politics was influenced by these states’ attempts (both explicit and implicit) to impose their own respective models of governance to the post-revolutionary Arab societies.

At first glance, the behaviour of these states seems to run counter their “international interests”. For instance, Turkey, under the guidance of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, adopted a very active stance by supporting the democratisation in the region and, particularly, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. This stance came at a significant cost. As the winds of revolt hit neighbouring Syria, Erdoğan sacrificed flourishing political and economic relations with Damascus to embrace the cause of the revolt, hosting and arming the anti-Assad rebels. As the situation degenerated in a catastrophic civil war, the outcome of this foreign policy move revealed to be disastrous for Turkey’s economy and security. At the same time, the collapse of the Egyptian democracy, with the elected President Mohammed Morsi (a member of the Muslim Brotherhood) overthrown by a coup, exposed the dangerous gable made by Erdoğan. However,
as regional pressure mounted against Ankara, Turkey neither deescalated nor changed the trajectory of its regional engagement. On the contrary, it became more aggressive in its challenge of Arab dictatorships, which led to the deterioration of relations with Egypt and to increasing regional isolation.

Similar considerations can be made regarding Iran and Saudi Arabia. While the Arab Spring is commonly regarded as a chapter in the geopolitical rivalry between these two powers, some of their respective foreign policy choices challenge this interpretation. For instance, in spite of having likely benefited from better relations with the United States during the Arab Spring, Iran maintained a strong anti-imperialist rhetoric, often embracing the revolts as a humiliation for the West. At the same time, Tehran supported the al-Assad regime in Syria, framing the rebellion as a Western plot, thus displaying an ambivalent attitude towards the revolt (as demonstrated by the Iranian inability to express a firm and vocal stance against the coup in Egypt). As for Saudi Arabia, despite the competition with Iran – especially in the Syrian civil war, in which the Saudis supported the opposition – the country spent most of its resources going against the Muslim Brotherhood. When the Egyptian army overthrew Morsi – who had supported the rebellion against pro-Iran Bashar al-Assad – and repressed his supporters, the Saudis cheered the move as a victory against ‘terrorism’.

In order to make sense of this complex picture, this thesis suggests that the foreign policy behaviour of these countries was influenced by domestic considerations, namely the political struggles within their respective political spheres. This consideration emphasises the need to re-evaluate the relationship between foreign policy, internal political struggles and the making of Middle East regional politics, both empirically and theoretically. This thesis takes on this task by answering a main research question: **How do internal political struggles reshape Middle East regional politics?** This question is addressed by analysing two interrelated streams of research, which I frame through the following sub-questions: How do discursive frameworks drive the foreign policy of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia? And to what extent have domestic political drivers of foreign policy evolved since the Arab Spring?

In addressing these questions concerning foreign policies of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia during the Arab Spring, this thesis builds on Pierre Bourdieu’s filed theory. In particular, this thesis develops a theoretical approach starting from two aspects of Bourdieu’s work. The first is his political sociology, which is captured by the concepts of political field, political capital and principle of vision and division. Bourdieu’s understanding of political struggle is based on
the idea that the exercise of political power is connected with the deployment of discourses aiming at rallying segments of the population behind symbols or narratives. This “game” is played through certain tacit rules accepted by all the “players” (political parties and individuals). These rules, which determine what can be said in the field, are the result of history and power relations in the field. In this thesis, I deploy this theoretical apparatus in the analysis of internal power struggles in Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. In doing so, I focus on the rhetoric deployed by policymakers in supporting their foreign policy choices. This is put in relation with the conditions of the national political fields, thus evaluating how foreign policy emerges from strategies aiming at enhancing or preserving political power at home. The second aspect is Bourdieu’s understanding of the international realm. In his idea, rather than being an independent arena, the international represented a space in which agents tried to impose as “universal” models, concepts, ideas and perspectives that are the product of their national experience. This approach is applied to the competition between different models of governance during the Arab Spring, which saw Turkish, Iranian and Saudi leaders trying to influence the internal politics of Arab countries through the promotion of their political ideas. In this analysis, I also evaluate how the ‘internationalisation’ of these ideas have affected Turkish, Iranian and Saudi politics by (de)legitimising dominant political actors, triggering political changes and reshaping power relations.

This thesis makes a twofold contribution. First, the thesis demonstrates how foreign policy discourses (and choices) can be traced to the position of political actors within internal political struggles. In other words, as the Arab Spring paved the way for a redefinition of principles of governance and of the relationship between politics and religion in Middle East politics, political leaders in Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia responded by mobilising symbolic resources that were the products of their own historical experiences in their respective national political arena. In this context, foreign policy behaviour of these countries was shaped by their leaders’ ambitions of imposing their narratives to the Arab Spring, as well as by their attempt to exploit the events for enhancing their internal legitimacy, or, in the case of Saudi regime, to preserve this legitimacy against an internal opposition sympathetic with the regional uprisings. Second, this work demonstrates how regional politics affected internal domestic struggle in these countries by connecting the “failure” of the Arab Spring to the authoritarian turn of Erdoğan’s rule, to the strengthening of the Supreme Leader Khamenei’s position in the Iranian political system and to the rise of Mohammed bin Salman’s authoritarian reformism in Saudi Arabia.
Introduction

At the end of March 2014, the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) recorded yet another victory in the Turkish local elections. In Ankara, cheering crowds gathered outside the party headquarter to celebrate the outcome of the election. The then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, leader of the AKP, who would that August become the President of the Republic, held a speech from one of the building’s balconies. After greeting the ecstatic crowd, the 81 Turkish provinces and the ‘sister and friendly capitals and cities of the world’ (Erdoğan, 2014), he continued:

*I thank my brothers in Palestine who saw our victory as their victory. I thank my brothers in Egypt who are struggling for democracy and who understand our struggle very well. [...] I thank my suffering brothers in Syria who pray for our victory although in a great pain, facing starvation and under bombs and bullets (ibid.).*

These references to events occurring in the region, such as Erdoğan’s mention of the struggle for democracy underway in Egypt, could seem unusual during a victory speech celebrating local elections. Referring to the events that had occurred between 2011 and the summer of 2013, namely the rise and fall of the Egyptian democratic experiment, Erdoğan brought attention to the ongoing repression of the Muslim Brotherhood in the country. In 2012, the first democratic presidential elections in Egypt had seen Mohammed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, as the winner. However, Morsi’s presidential experience was short-lived, ending in July 2013 following his removal at the hands of the army. A month later, the army violently repressed a demonstration held by a pro-Morsi group in Cairo’s Rabaa Square, which marked the beginning of a crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood.

The reference to Egypt in Erdoğan’s speech reflected the great political investment made by Turkey during the Arab Spring. Since the beginning of the regional upheavals, Turkish foreign policy had been characterised by enthusiastic support for the revolution and, in particular, of the rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood. Erdoğan himself expressed this support in a triumphal tour in September 2011 across the three countries affected by the Arab Spring, namely Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. He was not only welcomed as a hero and celebrated by festive crowds, but he also met with the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in these countries,
sharing with them his vision for the political future of the Arab Spring (Tol, 2011). This foreign policy adventurism rested on Arab interests for the so-called ‘Turkish model’ (ibid.; Samaan, 2013) – a unique combination of Islam, democracy and free-market stances embedded in a foreign policy discourse centred around democratic legitimacy and human rights.

The regional stance taken by Turkey, however, came at a significant cost. As the winds of revolt hit neighbouring Syria, once the “jewel of the crown” of the AKP’s foreign policy (see Phillips, 2011), Erdoğan sacrificed flourishing political and economic relations with Damascus to embrace the cause of the revolt, hosting and arming the anti-Assad rebels. The outcome of this foreign policy move revealed to be disastrous for Turkey’s economy and security. Although the overthrow of Morsi exposed the dangerous gamble made by Erdoğan during the Arab Spring, and as regional pressure mounted against Turkey, the AKP neither deescalated nor changed the trajectory of its regional engagement. On the contrary, it became more aggressive in its challenge of Arab dictatorships, which led to the deterioration of relations with Egypt and to increasing regional isolation.

Similarly, “atypical” foreign policy behaviours can be found in other regional powers, particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia. While the Arab Spring is commonly regarded as a chapter in the geopolitical rivalry between these two powers (see Salloukh, 2013; Berti and Guzansky, 2014; Hinnebusch, 2014a, p. 68), some of their respective foreign policy choices challenge this interpretation. For instance, in spite of having likely benefited from better relations with the United States (US) during the Arab Spring, Iran maintained a strong anti-imperialist rhetoric, often embracing the revolts as a humiliation for the West and ‘an irreparable defeat for America’ (Pomeroy and Mostafavi, 2011). At the same time, Tehran supported the al-Assad regime, framing the rebellion as a Western plot (see Fürtig, 2013). As for Saudi Arabia, despite the competition with Iran – especially in the Syrian civil war, in which the Saudis supported the opposition – the country spent most of its resources going against the Muslim Brotherhood. When the Egyptian army overthrew Morsi – who had supported the rebellion against pro-Iran Bashar al-Assad – and repressed his supporters, the Saudis cheered the move as a victory against ‘terrorism’ (Al Arabiya, 2013).

At first glance, the foreign policy of these countries during the Arab Spring seems to run counter to their “international interests”. In order to unpack this puzzle, I suggest taking a careful look on how regional politics is treated in internal political discourse. For instance, in considering Erdoğan’s speech, it is interesting to note that he not only mentioned the struggle
for Egyptian democracy but also added that Egyptians ‘understand our struggle very well’ (Erdoğan, 2014). This choice of words suggests that the struggle between the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian army were somehow intertwined with Turkish politics, leading one to wonder whether similar considerations can be made with regard to the foreign policy of Iran and Saudi Arabia as well. In the Iranian case, could the anti-Western rhetoric underpinning its engagement with regional events be a reflection of the history of a political system that had emerged from an anti-imperialist revolution? Or even in the case of Saudi Arabia, could the hostility towards Morsi mirror the anxieties of a monarchical regime that has experienced cyclical contestations from Islamist groups since the 1990s? To make sense of these seemingly irrational foreign policy behaviours, I suggest turning scholarly attention to the rhetoric used to justify them and to the images deployed in everyday domestic political discussions.

This complex and multifaceted picture suggests that the foreign policy approaches of these countries were influenced by domestic considerations, namely the political struggles within their respective political spheres. This consideration emphasises the need to re-evaluate the relationship between foreign policy, internal political struggles and the making of Middle East regional politics, both empirically and theoretically. Through the lens of Bourdieu’s field theory, my thesis analyses the foreign policies of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia during the Arab Spring to answer my main research question: How do internal political struggles reshape Middle East regional politics? This question is addressed by analysing two interrelated streams of research, which I frame through the following sub-questions: How do discursive frameworks drive the foreign policy of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia? And to what extent have domestic political drivers of foreign policy evolved since the Arab Spring?

The impact of the events of 2011 on regional dynamics and on International Relations (IR) theory has been a source of intense debate within the discipline (see Valbjørn, 2015). Surely, these developments have affected the status quo in the regional system and have seriously questioned the state–society relationship in Middle Eastern countries. Thus, the necessity to theorise regional order and states’ foreign policy behaviour in the Middle East has been a stimulating challenge for IR scholars, making the region an ideal ground for testing the alleged universality of IR theories as well as a starting point for developing new approaches. The study of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia’s policies towards the regional uprisings offers a stimulating perspective for considering how Middle Eastern politics have evolved since the Arab Spring. In consideration of their relative capabilities, regional aspirations and cultural-historical significance, these three countries’ foreign policies are crucial in shaping the (in)stability of
the regional system. Thus, any account of regional order in the Middle East cannot ignore the patterns of cooperation and rivalry among them. Moreover, the Arab Spring has had an indirect impact on Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia, in the sense that none of them experienced a regime change, allowing the research to maintain its focus on the contribution of Bourdieu in foreign policy behaviour (and IR). In fact, analysing case studies like Egypt or Tunisia would have presented the risk of dwelling on other complex issues, such as the international implications of domestic revolutions, thus losing sight of the central purpose of this work. Furthermore, this selection of cases is suitable to address the generalisability of the theory. Indeed, this selection presents three different types of domestic contexts: a relatively open society (Turkey); a mixed regime in which democratically elected institutions cohabit with theocratic ones (Iran); and an absolute monarchy (Saudi Arabia). Finally, these three states have been often referenced as possible models for the post-revolutionary societies, an aspect that is developed in the literature review below.

In the analysis of the foreign policies of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia towards the Arab Spring, three different “model discourses” emerged: a democratic model (the so-called Turkish model); an anti-imperialist model based on the legacy of the 1979 Iranian Revolution; and a conservative-authoritarian model. This thesis demonstrates how these discourses are embedded in national and regional power relations among different political agents. In this way, this thesis makes a twofold contribution to the debate on the impact of the Arab Spring on Middle East politics. First, by deconstructing foreign policy discourses, this thesis argues that they can be traced to the position of foreign policy actors within internal political struggles. In other words, as the Arab Spring paved the way for a redefinition of principles of governance and of the relationship between politics and religion in Middle East politics, political agents in Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia responded by mobilising symbolic resources that were the products of their own historical experiences in their respective national political arenas. In doing so, this thesis relies on Bourdieu’s political sociology, in particular on the concepts of political field, capital and principle of vision and division, as well as on the Bourdieu-inspired concept of doxic battles (Villumsen Berling, 2012; Senn and Elhardt, 2014). Thus, the discourses that guide the regional policies of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia are conceptualised as strategies of accumulation of political capital that are developed by political agents (the AKP, the Iranian regime and the Saudi royal family) to enhance, or preserve, their position in the field. Second, building upon a ‘Bourdiesuan’ conceptualisation of the international realms and of its relation with domestic politics, this thesis provides an analysis of how the political discourses in
Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia have changed since the Arab Spring, thus assessing the influence of the regional uprising in the strategies of reproduction of dominant political groups. In this way, this work demonstrates how Turkish, Iranian and Saudi foreign policies during the Arab Spring emerged from the intersection between the discourses within their respective national political fields and the regional debate during the uprising. In this way, I demonstrate how these countries’ foreign policies have both “internationalised” their internal political struggle and “nationalised” the regional symbolic struggle for the Arab Spring.

In this introduction, I present an overview of the basis of my work. First, I discuss the existing literature on Middle East politics and on the foreign policies of the three countries under analysis with a greater focus on the Arab Spring. This is achieved by focusing on four streams of literature. I start with a discussion of systemic approaches to Middle East politics during the Arab Spring, which mainly include a narrative focused on the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, carried out through the theoretical lens of neorealism and/or with a reference to the alleged sectarianisation of the Middle East. Then, I discuss those approaches that incorporate internal dynamics into the analysis of patterns of foreign policy behaviour during the Arab Spring. These include realist approaches that look inside the state, approaches that focus on ideational constructs (constructivism and others) and approaches that consider state–society relations (historical sociology and historical materialism). After this discussion, I briefly outline the theoretical contribution of the Bourdieu-inspired field-theoretical approach. This literature review is followed by a review of the methodological considerations underpinning the thesis. Finally, I present the structure of the thesis.

Theorising Middle East politics during the Arab Spring

More than ten years have passed since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, a series of popular uprisings that have shaken the status quo in the Middle East by questioning state–society relations and beyond. In particular, the events that occurred between 2011 and 2013 have had a great impact on regional dynamics and discourses. The collapse of secular regimes in this region – especially of the pro-West Mubarak regime in Cairo and the consequent rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood – seemed to question the pro-American order that had emerged after the Camp David Accords. Simultaneously, these shifts were conducive to regional discussions over the relationship between politics, democracy and religion. On this occasion,
three different – yet interrelated – political discourses emerged. First, in the case of Turkey, the political elites constructed a narrative based on democracy and human rights, as well as on the idea that the Turkish political development could work as a template for building the new Arab democracies. In doing so, the Erdoğan government made a significant diplomatic and political investment in the success of the revolt and the following process of democratisation. In particular, the AKP-led government saw political movements associated with the Muslim Brotherhood as possible vehicles for promoting Turkey’s own “brand” of “moderate Islam”. Second, in the case of Iran, the political discourse deployed in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring depicted the regional uprising as ‘inspired by the Iranian Islamic Revolution’ (Khamenei, 2011, as quoted by Abu Hilal, 2011, p. 1). This narrative, also known as ‘Islamic awakening’ (Chubin, 2012, pp. 16–17), underscored Islamist and anti-imperialist discourses, thus overshadowing the uprisings’ democratic features. Third, in Saudi Arabia, the regime, which had to deal with internal contestations and minor demonstrations, refrained from supporting regional uprisings and deployed a diametrically opposed language in defining the unfolding events. Whereas Turks and Iranians underlined ‘democracy’ or the ‘awakening’ of the Muslim masses, respectively, the Saudi discourse was underpinned by ‘stability’ and ‘anti-terrorism’. An example of this can be found in the case of Bahrain, where Saudi troops ultimately intervened in favour of the regime, despite the protests from the Iranian regime (Mehr News, 2011) and scepticism from Turkish government1.

These different rhetorical postures reflect three divergent foreign policy trajectories that eventually reshaped Middle East politics. An example of these three trajectories can be seen in the case of the collapse of the young Egyptian democracy. After the 2013 coup – during which General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi overthrew the first democratically elected President of Egypt Mohammed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood – Saudi Arabia took a visible stance in supporting the army’s takeover. The Saudi regime backed both the coup and the subsequent bloody crackdown against Morsi’s supporters, framing them in line with the anti-terrorism narrative associated with the rising al-Sisi regime. In his official statement of support for the bloody crackdown of pro-Morsi protesters in Rabaa Square in August 2013, King Abdullah affirmed that ‘The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, its people and government stood and stand by today with their brothers in Egypt against terrorism’ (Al-Jazeera, 2013a). Moreover, Riyadh puts all its financial and political weight in support of Cairo, thus partially neutralising any

1 Erdoğan referred to the events in Bahrain as a ‘new Karbala’ – a reference to the massacres against Shias that occurred in 680 CE in today’s Iraq, in which the third Shia Imam Husain was killed – while Davutoğlu tried to find a diplomatic and political solution (Lindenstrauss, 2012, p.10).
potential sanction and pressure from the US and Europe. Notwithstanding this support, King Abdullah did not directly address Morsi’s legitimacy as president, in stark contrast with the then-Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who labelled the coup as ‘an attempt to destroy democracy’ (Erdoğan, 2013, as quoted in Yegin, 2016, p. 412). This strong rhetoric was accompanied by a deterioration of Cairo–Ankara relations. On its part, the Iranian regime maintained an ambivalent position on the fall of Morsi. On the one hand, the regime condemned it. On the other hand, however, both Khamenei and Rouhani also blamed the Muslim Brotherhood for its own demise (Stein, 2015, p. 70). The Iranian posture partially reflected the complex relations with the Morsi administration, characterised by both a partial improvement of relations with Cairo and by the divergences on the Syrian civil war, in which the Iranian regime supported the al-Assad regime, while Morsi supported the rebels. The AKP government and the Saudi regime also embraced the cause of the uprising against the Baathist regime in Damascus. However, they supported different, rivalling factions, thus failing to create a united anti-regime front (see Phillips, 2016, 2017).

Thus, what emerges from this scenario are three different “camps” in the region led by these three regional powers. First, there is Turkey, which under the guidance of the AKP supported the uprisings and regime changes at the cost of its diplomatic relations with Riyadh and Tehran as well as with the al-Assad regime in Damascus and the al-Sisi regime in Cairo. Second, there is Saudi Arabia, which, as the main regional force behind a coalition of conservative monarchies (such as the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain), worked to contain the revolts (with the exception of that in Syria) and to preserve the status quo. Finally, there is Iran, with its regional allies (or proxies), which despite initial enthusiasm was ambivalent towards the Arab Spring. To clarify this picture, it is necessary to take a few steps back and examine how the existing literature has addressed the evolution of regional politics after the Arab Spring. To respond to the second research question on the role of internal power struggles in shaping foreign policy behaviour and regional dynamics, this literature review starts by addressing those approaches that rule out domestic politics entirely (such as neorealism and “conventional” constructivism). Then it will discuss the other approaches that do consider domestic politics, outlining the analytical and empirical issues that these works might present in terms of regional policies during the Arab Spring.
A new chapter in the Saudi Arabia–Iran rivalry? Systemic approaches to Middle East politics during the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring has prompted a lively debate among IR scholars. Overall, within the discipline, there is no consensus over the driving factors of states’ foreign policy behaviours, nor is there one on the patterns of cooperation and competition in a regional system or on why certain states pursue hegemonic ambitions. Some approaches identify these factors by relying solely on systemic factors; the most prominent of these approaches is neorealism. According to this relevant school of thought, states are rational and unitary actors whose foreign policy behaviour is determined by their position within the international system as well as by their relative power as “measured” in terms of material capabilities (Waltz, 1979, 1990; see also Elman, 1996). Within the realm of the International Relations of the Middle East, the realist thinking has underpinned analyses that have generally dismissed or downsized the role of ideology (and other ideational and domestic factors) in shaping regional politics while highlighting, for instance, material and systemic interests, such as the necessity to balance against a ‘threatening power’ (Walt, 1987). This state-centric (or Westphalian) vision of regional politics has yielded considerable influence among scholars of the Middle East. For instance, despite deploying different theoretical accounts as their starting point, even Buzan and Waever (2003) and Hinnebusch (2003, 2014) conclude that (at least in recent years) states’ foreign policies in the Middle East work according to a state-centric, or Westphalian-style, logic.

Accordingly, a consistent body of literature understands regional developments in the wake of the Arab Spring as a new chapter of the regional competition between the Saudi-led, pro-Western Arab bloc and the Iranian-led, anti-Western axis of resistance (Salloukh, 2013; Berti and Guzansky, 2014; Hinnebusch, 2014, p. 68). This interpretation echoes Kerr’s (1971) ‘Arab cold war’, which refers to the tensions between Pan-Arab republics led by Egyptian President Nasser and conservative monarchies led by Saudi Arabia. In other words, this is not a conflict in the military sense but an ideological one, involving the very stability and domestic legitimacy of the Arab regimes. However, contrary to the “Old Arab Cold War”, the new regional dynamics have translated into growing attention being paid to a non-Arab state, Iran. In turn, Iran has been able to project its influence in the Arab world by supporting Islamist non-state actors (Valbjørn and Bank, 2012). Thus, similarly to the case of Nasser’s Egypt in the
1950s and 1960s, Saudi Arabia and other pro-American regimes have been concerned not only with Iranian hard power capabilities but also with its capacity to interfere in inter-Arab affairs and thus influence Arab politics through groups like Hezbollah and Hamas (Ryan, 2012). Nevertheless, although this ‘Saudi Arabia vs Iran’ narrative, in certain cases, accepts ideological (and religious) considerations, the focus of the analysis remains the two states, considered as monolithic entities.

Along similar lines, the sectarian hypothesis has also attracted the interests of scholars, particularly in light of the Saudi-led repression of Bahrain’s protests, the proxy conflict in Syria and the rise of the Islamic State (Daesh). This account of regional politics sees the Middle East as divided in two camps: a loose Sunni alliance (led by Saudi Arabia, but which includes also Turkey) and an Iran-led ‘Shia crescent’ (see, for instance, Abdo, 2013, 2017; Laborie Iglesias, 2013; Byman, 2014; Elhadj, 2014). On the one hand, this interest in sectarian identities, which, has gained increasing prominence in the field since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 as the main driver of regional politics (see, for instance, Nasr, 2006), may signal a “return” to a conventional constructivist account of Middle East politics. This stream of literature sees the roots of foreign policy behaviours in the region as the products of state identities and normative structures. Classic examples of this perspective are the works on the impact of Arabism in shaping the national interests and, therefore, foreign policy behaviours of Arab states (Barnett, 1998; Telhami and Barnett, 2002). With the alleged decline of pan-Arabism following the Camp David agreement (Ajami, 1978, 1992), the attention towards political identities and cultural norms has declined. In a certain sense, the increasing salience of religious and sectarian identities represented a challenge to the narrative of an ‘identity-saturated’ Middle East (Valbjørn, 2020, p. 18) and, therefore, to a realist approach based on realpolitik. However, in contrast, the current literature tends to consider sectarianism less as an ideational structure shaping Saudi and Iranian foreign policy behaviours and more as a constraint on the pursuit of foreign policy goals (ibid., p. 20; see also Mabon, 2019, p. 147). Thus, even if this analysis accepts considering the agency of non-state actors, such as local proxies, its core remains committed to an analysis of the foreign policy behaviour of Saudi Arabia and Iran as unitary entities pursuing what we can describe as a realist understanding of their national interests.

In any case, the sectarian hypothesis, whether we take it as a factor underpinning a systemic understanding of the Saudi–Iranian rivalry or accepting a conventional constructivist argument in which sectarian identities define foreign policy behaviour tout court, presents considerable empirical issues. According to this perspective, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt should have
united their forces in an anti-Iranian alliance. Both a realist Saudi–Iran proxy war logic and a sectarian perspective (since the Saudis, the AKP-led Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood are all “enlisted” in the alleged “Sunni camp”) would support this outcome. However, this alliance never materialised. Even in the case of Syria, where both Turkey and Saudi Arabia officially advocated the end of Bashar al-Assad’s regime, the common “commitment” did not take the shape of a proper coalition. Rather, the two not only deployed a different language in framing the Syrian events – the Saudi official discourse was more sectarian, while Erdoğan and his Minister of Foreign Affairs Davutoğlu were more focused on democracy – but they also failed to coordinate their efforts. Turkey (and Qatar) supported the Muslim Brotherhood, while Saudi Arabia funnelled arms and financial aid to other groups, including Salafi factions. The two coalitions never formed a united revolutionary front, and their sponsors did not make a great effort towards this end (Phillips, 2017).

Moreover, the “Iran vs Saudi Arabia explanation” as a whole does not address the Saudi animosity towards the Muslim Brotherhood. As it happened, the Muslim Brotherhood’s rise to power in Egypt did not coincide with a radical shift in Egyptian foreign policy towards Iran. There was a brief improvement in Egypt–Iran relations, when the first state visit to Tehran by an Egyptian President since the 1979 Islamic Revolution took place. However, the Morsi administration criticised the Syrian regime and the role Iranians were playing in the civil war. Morsi’s intervention in the 2012 Non-Aligned Movement summit in Tehran was an example of that. On that occasion, Morsi expressed his solidarity ‘with the struggle of the Syrian people against an oppressive regime’, stressing that supporting the protesters was ‘an ethical duty as it is a political and strategic necessity’ (Al-Jazeera, 2012). In turn, the Syrian delegation walked out of the room, an episode that ‘embarrassed’ the Iranians (ibid.). Therefore, the Saudi regime’s support for Morsi’s removal, as well as its strong support for al-Sisi – who took a far more cautious and neutral approach towards the Syrian civil war – cannot be understood as a reaction to an alleged Iran–Egypt rapprochement. Likewise, according to a sectarian lens, relations between the Kingdom and the Morsi government should have been cooperative, since both supported the “Sunni struggle” against the Alawite al-Assad. However, this was not clearly the case.

In conclusion, framing the Arab Spring through the prism of a rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran does not tell the whole story. The case of Saudi Arabia explained above is a perfect example of that. Saudi foreign policy behaviour fits neither a notion of national interest as shaped by a supranational Sunni sectarian identity nor a realist account according to which
Saudi Arabia should have focused on creating an alliance to balance the threat coming from a rising Iran. Similar objections can be made regarding Turkey and Iran. A structural realist argument for their action would have seen their assertiveness as a result of opportunities and constraints that appeared in the regional environment after the Arab Spring. For instance, Tehran’s attitude towards the Syrian conflict is seen as the logical outcome of the Iranian national interest in preserving the Shia Crescent as well as of the Iranian position in the Middle East’s balance of power (Uzun and Ekşi, 2017). However, such a perspective would ignore the tendency of the Iranian leadership to also work with Sunni groups (especially Hamas) and the Iranian reluctance in taking foreign policy steps necessary to improve its position in the regional balance of power in relation to Riyadh by re-establishing diplomatic relations with the US and Israel. As for the case of Turkey, a systemic approach would not explain Ankara’s refusal to accept the coup in Egypt as a fait accompli. Rather, the support for the Muslim Brotherhood led to a deterioration of relations with Cairo, Riyadh and other Sunni states, while its stances over Palestine and Syria created additional issues with Israel and Iran, thus bringing the country into a state of isolation that does not really fit with its relative material power on the regional chessboard. Therefore, given these circumstances, the study of foreign policy behaviour of these three states during the Arab Spring would surely benefit from abandoning the idea of the state as a unitary actor, which underpins systemic analyses, to incorporate endogenous factors. The central argument of my thesis is that, to grasp not just the relevance of the domestic politics but also its relation to the regional realm in producing foreign policy, it is useful to look at Bourdieu and to his notion of political field. However, to justify that, it is necessary to consider other approaches that offer an analysis of domestic factors.

The relationship between the domestic and the international has long been a crucial issue within IR. However, as Mabon and Lynch (among others) note, in the case of the Middle East the relationship is made more complex by the presence of shared ethnicities, identities and religions, which ‘create a shared normative environment and distinctive set of political rules of the game’ (Mabon and Lynch, 2020, p. 3). The Arab Spring, during which long-lived regimes were overthrown and state–society relations throughout regional politics were questioned, has exacerbated this aspect of regional politics, creating both new opportunities and threats for the political elites of regional powers like Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Thus, to make sense of Middle East politics since 2011, several approaches to the inclusion of domestic politics have been proposed by earlier scholars. Overall, for my purpose of demonstrating the usefulness of a Bourdieu-inspired approach to domestic politics based on the concept of political field in the
International Relations of the Middle East, I discuss three streams that can be identified in the extant literature on the foreign policy behaviours of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia after the Arab Spring. The first includes those works that, while remaining within the realm of realism, incorporate domestic variables into the analysis to explain foreign policy choices that cannot be grasped by systemic factors. The second includes those works that place domestic contestations and bargains over ideational constructs at the centre of the analysis. The third includes those works that explain the relationship between domestic politics and the changing regional order through the ruling elites’ strategies of reproduction.

**Realist approaches and domestic variables**

After Stephen Walt (1987), who used Middle East politics to advance the conceptualisation of balance of threats, other scholars have tried to adapt realism to the region by bringing domestic considerations into the picture. One of these approaches is neoclassical realism. According to this perspective, the changes in the regional balance of power that occurred during the Arab Spring were filtered by intervening variables at the domestic level, which affected the way policymakers in the region perceive the external structure of opportunities and constraints and thus their response in terms of foreign policy choices. For instance, in the case of Turkey, a neoclassical realist account sees foreign policy choices after the Arab Spring as affected by the AKP’s ideological preferences as well as by its greater freedom to manoeuvre due to the consolidation of its domestic powerbase. These internal factors are used to explain Turkey’s over-ambitious foreign policy behaviour and failure to adapt to the shift in the regional balance of power after 2013 (Yeşilyurt, 2017). In the case of Saudi Arabia, neoclassical realist scholars describe its foreign policy behaviour as influenced by leaders’ perceptions regarding the declining role of the US in the region and Iran’s growing influence (Juneau et al., 2019, p. 14), by its strategic culture (ibid.), by domestic fears regarding the Muslim Brotherhood and by the personalities of the officials involved in foreign policy (Phillips, 2020). As far as Iran is concerned, foreign policy behaviour is ascribed to a combination of a rejectionist state identity and domestic politics characterised by factionalism, in which the Supreme Leader Khamenei is the final arbiter. These ‘domestic pathologies’ (Juneau, 2015, p. 81–103) have created a path dependency that resulted in the adoption of ‘suboptimal’ foreign policy behaviour, such as the
confrontational attitude towards the US and its allies in the region (Israel and Saudi Arabia) (Ibid.; see also Juneau et al., 2019: 15–16).

By looking inside the state and including domestic politics in the analysis, neoclassical realists enhance the explanatory potential of the realist paradigm and offer important insight into how internal dynamics may influence foreign policy behaviour. Moreover, this type of analysis also goes beyond a conceptualisation of power based solely on material capabilities by considering other power resources as well, such as ideological and cultural appeal (Juneau, 2015, p. 41; see also Phillips, 2020). In this vein, Iran’s confrontational foreign policy is the result of this ‘ideational’ source of power (Juneau, 2015, p.77). Nevertheless, neoclassical realism, as applied in the study of the Middle East, relies mainly on systemic factors to explain grand strategies and long-term patterns of foreign policy behaviour. As Juneau et al. argue, regional leaders generally tend to ‘incorporate their domestic political requirements into their choice of strategies to respond to international constraints and opportunities, rather than tailoring foreign policy primarily to meet their domestic political needs’ (Juneau et al., 2019, p. 12). In other words, the interests that guide foreign policies are situated mainly in the international sphere and are framed in terms of maximising the state’s position in the regional balance of power, while domestic politics tend to be seen mostly as a filter that has “distortive” effects which prevent the adoption of “rational” and “optimal” approaches necessary to enhance the state’s position in the international (or regional) system. Following this logic, Juneau et al. argue that internal political factors were not particularly salient in explaining the Saudi–Iranian rivalry during the Arab Spring with respect to considerations based on constraints and opportunities offered by the changes in the regional balance of power (ibid., p. 18). This greater consideration of the external realm also applies to non-material power resources. As Stein notes, according to a neoclassical realist account, the Iranian regime’s interest in supporting ideologically aligned non-state actors is purely international and not domestic (Stein, 2021, p. 3).

Contrary to this line of argument, I contend that this definition of interest does not fully grasp the patterns of foreign policy behaviour in response to the Arab Spring. By questioning state–society relations throughout the Middle East, the uprisings have put domestic politics at the centre of the region, thus both opening opportunities for regimes to extend their internal powerbase and creating threats for them. Therefore, I argue in the case of the Arab Spring that domestic political considerations did not just influence foreign policy behaviours; they also co-defined the aims of the policymakers. Accordingly, Turkish and Iranian bids for regional hegemony between 2011 and 2013 were not made possible by the mere changes in the regional
balance of power but by how the regional political discourse intersected with existing internal power configurations in these states. Similarly, the refusal of Saudi Arabia to engage with the Morsi administration in balancing Iran reflects a deeper pattern of behaviour, which is connected with the political structure that underpins the permanence and legitimacy of the monarchical regime. Therefore, a field-theoretical approach inspired by Bourdieu develops the argument regarding the impact of domestic politics on foreign policy behaviour differently than neoclassical realism. As I illustrate in the first chapter, by combining Bourdieu’s concepts of political field, political capital and symbolic power with his conceptualisation of the internationalisation of ideas, it is possible to appreciate that regional and domestic politics are in a dynamic relationship in which international and national interests and power resources are interchangeable.

Remaining within the realist tradition, other approaches concede that internal considerations bear the same relevance in shaping foreign policy behaviour and interests in the Middle East, especially in the case of Saudi Arabia. One of these is based on the concept of omnibalancing. Elaborated by Stephen David to address the behaviour of ‘Third World states’, this theory argues that policymakers create foreign policies to counter external and internal threats to their rule (David, 1991). Nonneman introduces the concept into the study of Saudi foreign policy to explain how the general patterns of Riyadh’s regional behaviour are dictated by domestic and external ideological pressures and constraints (Nonneman, 2005). In the study of the Arab Spring, omnibalancing has been re-adapted to also include opportunities to enhance the elites’ rule at home and abroad, and not just threats and constraints, as determinants of foreign policy. Thus, Saudi foreign policy towards Iran can be seen as a response both to the revolutionary ideology of the Islamic Republic and to its alleged appeal to the Shia minority and as an opportunity to exploit sectarianism to deflect internal criticism coming from Saudi Sunni Islamist dissidents (Watkins, 2020). A similar line of argument is adopted by another realist perspective, which sees ideological rivalry and regime survival considerations as the key explanatory variables of the tense relations between Saudi Arabia and the Muslim Brotherhood as well as between Saudi Arabia and Turkey during the outbreak of the regional uprisings (Gause, 2015; Ryan, 2015, 2019). The political model represented by political Islam – whether that of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or the “post-Islamist” AKP in Turkey – was seen as an ideological threat to the Saudi monarchical system. These concerns are central to foreign policy choices of regional states as is the fact that an anti-Iranian entente between the Saudis and the Turks never materialised (Gause, 2015, pp. 16–17).
These analyses introduce an important element into the picture by underlining how internal concerns of the Saudi regime are central to the construction of foreign policy. Moreover, both omnibalancing (Watkins, 2020) and the regime survival argument (Gause, 2003, 2009, 2015; Ryan, 2019) see dominant political classes in the Middle East as concerned not just with threats arising from material capabilities but also, and in certain cases to a greater extent, with ideological ones. In this way, these perspectives grasp two important aspects that guide foreign policy behaviour in the Middle East, namely the regime’s internal concerns and the battle of ideas triggered by the Arab Spring. However, neither omnibalancing nor regime survival offer a conceptualisation of these ideological threats, nor do they present a comprehensive framework to analyse ideas and connect them within both the internal political struggles and the changing regional realm, thus reproducing a realist model of balance of power inside the state (Stein, 2019, p. 48; see also Allinson, 2016, p.11). This is potentially a problem since, for instance, we are arguing that the internal threats the Saudi regime faced from Islamist dissident groups were considered the most important factor that affected Saudi foreign policy behaviour during the Arab Spring, including support for the coup in Egypt, financing extremist groups in Syria and the approach towards Turkey and Iran. In the case of the anti-Muslim Brotherhood strategies, I argue that, to understand this ideological hostility, it is necessary to incorporate the Saudi internal socio-political (and religious) context into the picture. In this operation, Bourdieu’s field theory is particularly useful. By adopting this theoretical lens, it is possible to demonstrate how the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in the region, and the consequent increasing prominence of the Turkish model in the Middle East political debate, had emboldened a reformist discourse in Saudi Arabia, thus threatening the Saudi authoritarian mode of governance. In this way, it possible to create a framework able to explain Saudi, as well as Iranian and Turkish, foreign policy behaviour during the uprising.

*Domestic politics and ideational constructs*

Another perspective to be taken into account when considering how domestic politics shapes foreign policy behaviour is the dynamics through which certain internal discourses regarding the state’s identity, ideology and role emerge as the dominant paradigm informing foreign policy and not just as mere rhetorical tools used by leaders to justify policies based on power politics. In this respect, constructivism has become an important tradition within the study of International Relations of the Middle East (see Barnett, 1998; and Telhami and Barnett, 1998).
Importantly, the constructivist tradition in this subfield, echoing Edward Said, underlines the importance of domestic debates over the definition of national identity. These contests shape the ‘menu of choices’ of national identities (Telhami and Barnett, 2002, p. 6), which in the case of the contemporary Middle East is limited to three big categories: Arabism, Islam and statism (or Zionism in the case of Israel). According to this framework, foreign policy behaviour depends on which of these categories, as well as which combination of them, emerge as the favourite option of government leaders, thus shaping their perceptions of the state’s interests. Thus, to grasp Egypt’s foreign policy under Nasser, it is necessary to note how the influence of Arabism succeeded in shaping Egyptian national interests (ibid, p.17).

A constructivist analysis based on multiple national identities has had a certain impact on the study of foreign policy behaviour of the three cases at the heart of this thesis. For instance, by taking a deeper look at the debate on national identity in Turkish politics, it is possible to appreciate how domestic struggles among different political parties (secularists, nationalists and Islamists) shape Ankara’s foreign policy preferences (Bozdağlıoğlu, 2003). Similarly, Iranian foreign policy behaviour can be considered as being shaped by three elements of its national identity: Iranism, Islam and Shi’ism (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016). This type of analysis offers an interesting insight on the nature of the domestic power struggles and their relations with foreign policy behaviour. However, in this framework, ideational factors tend to be viewed exclusively through a cultural lens, thus making it difficult to understand how certain identity discourses support, or threaten, positions of power within domestic politics, as well as the mechanisms through which certain identity discourses prevail in the domestic struggle. Moreover, in the case of the Arab Spring, by explaining foreign policy behaviour through cultural (and religious) identities, this type of constructivist approach risks reducing the debate to the sectarian hypothesis, with all the problems already highlighted above.

However, this version of constructivism does not hold a monopoly over the discussion of the ideational factors in the International Relations of the Middle East. Rather, other constructivist analyses go beyond the concept of identity in explaining the impact of domestic politics on foreign policy behaviour. For instance, in the case of Iranian foreign policy during the Ahmadinejad administration (2005-2013), by combining identity with ideology\(^2\) in a constructivist analysis, Warnaar convincingly argues that foreign policy discourses are rooted

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\(^2\) The conceptualisation of ideology used by Warnaar is different from the one ascribed by Marxist and Gramscian literature and is mainly based on the works of John Thompson but re-elaborated in a constructivist fashion (Warnaar, 2013, p 36 and p.186, note 3).
in the Iranian internal discursive framework, thus explaining the persistence of anti-American foreign policy attitudes (Warnaar, 2013). Other approaches deploy ideational factors and domestic politics that go beyond constructivism. For instance, ontological security theory offers a different, and in certain cases, more nuanced analysis on the impact of Islam on regional politics (Darwich, 2016, 2019). In this view, for example, the Saudi animosity towards the Muslim Brotherhood is explained through the notion that similarity between identities can generate conflict instead of cooperation. Thus, the presence of an Islamist Sunni regime in Egypt endangered the Saudi identity as an Islamic model (Darwich, 2016). Another important contribution, especially in the Turkish case, is given by those analyses that focus on the notion of “role”, instead of “identity”, in considering the impact of domestic political discourses in foreign policy. An interesting aspect of the role theoretical approach consists in its challenge to the notion of Turkish state as a unitary actor through a discussion of domestic role contestation (Özdamar, 2016). In the case of the Arab Spring, most of this literature is concerned with the so-called Turkish model as the role adopted by the AKP in the Middle East (Aras and Gorener, 2010, p.85), as well as in responding to the Arab Spring (Dal and Erşen, 2014). This approach offers an important insight in understanding the determination of the AKP in supporting regime change throughout the region and in approaching the Muslim Brotherhood.

The aspect of the “model discourse” presents an interesting perspective on regional politics during the uprising. The cases of Turkish and Iranian foreign policy discourses suggest an attempt to export their respective models of governance. Thus, political ideas can be seen as vehicles of influence in the region. This is the case for Turkish–Iranian competition for the political leadership of the Arab Spring, which Goksel defines as a ‘Battle of Ideas’ (Goksel, 2013). This perspective on the influence of regional political model is surely a better and less “orientalist” approach within a certain stream of literature that analyses the prospective of political development of the post-revolutionary states according to a Western-centric, linear-progressive vision ending with Western-style liberal democracy³. Nevertheless, Goksel, as well as other authors, has considered the discourse around the Turkish and Iranian models mostly in relation to their applicability towards the post-revolutionary Middle East rather than as a main feature of Ankara and Tehran’s foreign policies during the Arab Spring (see Goksel, 2013; Khatib and Ghanem, 2018). Others argue that regional politics during the Arab Spring has been dominated by three models of governance, namely a group of Saudi-led conservative

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³ For a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis of this stream of literature on the Arab Spring, see Hom (2016).
monarchies, a Turkish-brand of political Islam and the Iranian revolutionary model of the Islamic Republic (Duran and Yilmaz, 2013; Khoury, 2013; Gause, 2015).

In this scenario, it can be argued that foreign policy discourses deployed by these governments reflect a tendency by these actors to ‘support abroad the same kinds of political structure they enjoy […] at home’ (Stein, 2015, p. 68). However, this does not seem to be the whole story. After all, the Iranians did not explicitly call for the adoption of the Velāyat-e faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist) institutional framework in the post-revolutionary states, thus focusing more on anti-imperialism. This does not mean that they are not exporting their political brand (Stein, 2015). Nevertheless, the relationships between regional politics and models of governance and between regional politics and domestic politics need further elaboration. Unfortunately, neither role theory nor other approaches based on ideational factors offer an analysis that connects domestic political struggles among different political factions to the surrounding regional “battle of models”. In other words, Turkish, Iranian and Saudi foreign policies during the Arab Spring raise questions that go beyond the type of identity or role perception, or ideological discourse, that underpin their external behaviour. Rather, we should also ask what these discourses entail. How did these discourses foster the external and internal legitimisation of foreign policy actors? How did these discourses interact with each other in regional politics?

My Bourdieu-inspired field-theoretical approach, while agreeing with the assumption that ideational factors should be taken seriously, tries to tackle these issues by offering a different perspective on domestic politics and its relevance in foreign policy. In my approach, ideational factors are considered in light of the concept of political field deployed to analyse the internal realm. This conceptualisation of domestic politics entails a focus on discourses, which lead us to problematise the impact of ideational factors on domestic and regional politics, rather than taking it for granted. Discourses should not be confused with political ideas. Rather, they constitute ‘the locus where ideas take shape in the first place’ (Epstein, 2011, p. 183). Ideational factors, such as the Wahhabi identity or the role model, do not arise, so to speak, “out of the blue” but emerge within pre-constituted boundaries that define what policymakers can and cannot say (compare ibid.). In this sense, Bourdieu’s concept of political field, with its focus on political discourses, can offer a precious insight on domestic debates over ideas and identities in Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia and their impact on foreign policy behaviour.
To be sure, this is not the first time that a discourse analysis has been applied to the study of foreign policy in the Middle East. For example, drawing on the works of Doty (1993) and Hansen (2006), Warnaar applies discourse analysis to understand the role of ideology in Iranian foreign policy (Warnaar, 2013). However, contrary to Warnaar’s constructivist approach based on ideology, my approach deploys Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of symbolic power. Overall, the issue of power is an aspect that is usually neglected by approaches based on ideational factors (see Guzzini, 2000). These theories, when analysing the impact of certain ideational constructs, do not consider how the adoption of these concepts has excluded other possible alternatives. In other words, ‘[t]he prevailing of one particular social construct is an effect of power’ (Epstein, 2011, p. 191). This has considerable implications for studying the impact of domestic debates over ideas on foreign policy. For instance, by exploring the concept of soft power applied to Turkey, Angey-Sentuc and Molho build an argument that goes beyond the adoption of certain ideas by academics and politicians, thus deconstructing ‘the interests and power structures that lie behind soft-power rhetoric’ (2015, p. 9). While this link between power and internal discursive structure is acknowledged by the concept of ideology adopted by Warnaar, Bourdieu’s field theory elaborates it through a relational and fungible vision of political power, which relates with its concept of political capital. In other words, for Bourdieu, the exercise of power and domination depends on the distribution of certain material and immaterial resources among the agents. In the case of political structures, which are defined by the circulation of discourses, these resources are defined as forms of prestige, obtained through recognition and the mobilisation of segments of society (Bourdieu, 1991b, 2005; Guzzini, 2013).

Therefore, in relation to my research, we can argue that the discourses deployed by Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia around the Arab Spring (namely, the “Turkish model”, the “Islamic awakening” and the anti-Muslim Brotherhood rhetoric) are not just expressions of an internal ideational structure. Rather, they are strategies of accumulation of political capital adopted by specific political agents (respectively, the AKP, Khamenei and the Saudi regime) to advance, or preserve, their respective positions within these structures (or ‘field’) in relation to other agents. Moreover, political discourses, especially foreign policy ones, are not delimited to domestic politics. Instead, they circulate throughout the international realm. Thus, Turkish, Iranian and Saudi foreign policy discourses should be understood not just in relation to their respective domestic politics but also in relation to their interactions with each other and with the changing regional realm. For instance, the adoption and evolution of the “Turkish model
“discourse” should be understood as a strategy of reproduction deployed by the AKP both to accumulate political power domestically and in relation to a Middle East characterised by the competition with the Iranian revolutionary appeal and by the Saudi counterrevolutionary discourse. My approach explains this aspect through Bourdieu’s works in the international circulation of ideas (Bourdieu, 1999; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999), in which he demonstrates how national and international power struggles are intertwined.

_Historical materialism, historical sociology and the domestic power struggles: hegemonic classes, strategies of reproduction and foreign policy behaviour_

A third stream of literature includes historical materialist and historical sociological approaches. The starting point of these analyses is a theoretical operation in which state–society relations are problematised, historicised and connected with the international (Halliday, 2005; Lawson, 2006; Hobson, Lawson and Rosenberg, 2010; Stein, 2019, 2021). Accordingly, the state is not an autonomous entity but a tool for the social, economic and ideological domination of a ruling class, which deploys foreign policy as a strategy of reproducing its power against internal and external threats. This analysis offers different points of similarities with my Bourdieu-inspired approach. These approaches, contrary to realist approaches, offer analytical toolkits that are able to problematise the regimes’ interests in dealing with internal adversaries without recurring to the ahistorical balance-of-power explanation offered by some realist accounts (compare Stein, 2019). Moreover, historical sociology also criticises the constructivist approach to ideational constructs for its lack of consideration of power as well as of material interests and social forces that produce them (Halliday, 2005, pp. 30-35; Yalvaç, 2014, p.124). Contrary to most constructivist accounts, historical materialist and sociological approaches deploy the notion of ideology in a way that connects discourses to the social forces that produce them and identifies the interests of these forces in both the domestic and the international realm (see, among others, Halliday, 2005).

In other words, these approaches, by looking at the impact of domestic politics on foreign policy, draw from the neo-Marxist tradition and thereby examine the ruling classes as they externalise their strategies of reproduction to preserve their political and ideological domination at home. Examples of these works can be found in Turkish foreign policy, where the role of the AKP is conceptualised as a central tool for the rise of a religious bourgeoisie.
For instance, by deploying and developing Brenner’s theories of social reproduction, Hoffmann and Cemgil argue that foreign policy under the AKP ‘is a reflection of the changing strategies of reproduction of the Turkish government in response to perceived challenges both within and outside Turkey’ (Hoffmann and Cemgil, 2016, p.1298). Thus, the AKP’s strategies of survival are the main driver of foreign policy behaviour. For instance, the continued support of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and of anti-Assad forces in Syria serves to increase the electoral appeal of the religious conservative constituency, thus counteracting the lack of credibility attributable to the increasing authoritarianism at home (ibid, p. 1282).

An increasing number of works within this stream of literature draw from the social theory of Antonio Gramsci in order to conceptualise the relationship between political elites and their social constituency, as well as the way this relationship affects foreign policy behaviour. So far, this scholarship has developed analyses based on various Gramsci’s concepts. For instance, remaining on the case of Turkey, the AKP experience can be defined through Gramsci’s conceptualisation of ‘hegemony’. Accordingly, AKP’s policies are seen as part of a project for achieving, or preserving, the rule of a rising bourgeoisie through the consent of the masses. Foreign policy is key for the attainment of this objective. As such, Turkish foreign policy is defined as the international dimension of the ‘hegemonic project’ of this social class represented by the AKP (Yalvaç, 2012; 2014; 2016), or, to put in different terms, Turkish foreign policy is viewed ‘in light of the changing dynamics of the domestic class struggles for hegemony that occurs at the economic, political and ideological levels and through their links to the global social formation’ (Yalvaç, 2014, p. 130).

Other works conceptualise the relationship between the AKP and Turkish bourgeoisie through Gramsci’s notion of ‘passive revolution’, rather than in terms of ‘hegemony’. In this sense, the AKP’s political experience, or ‘Turkish model’, is considered as instrumental in absorbing the “Islamist challenge” into the global neo-liberal order (compare Tuğal, 2016, pp. 25-29). In this view, foreign policy behaviour during the Arab Spring is considered as driven by three factors, namely ‘political economy’, ‘ideological heritage’ and sectarianism (ibid, pp. 173-181). While the latest factor presents the empirical issues already explained above, an analysis based on the first two offers an interesting insight. Accordingly, the AKP saw in the Arab Spring the opportunity to consolidate the capitalist and Islamist credentials of its regime, as well as to export, with the support of the United States, its model of passive revolution in region (ibid.). This type of interpretation presents some affinity with my analysis. Indeed, similarly to Tuğal, I also contend that the AKP’s foreign policy during the Arab Spring aimed at both exporting
its “model” and to strengthen the legitimacy of its rule at home – an endeavour that, however, ended up with a delegitimation of the democratic credentials of the AKP (compare Ibid.). Nevertheless, I contend that the model represented by then AKP can be better understood if we consider the relationship between the party and the Turkish bourgeoisie through Bourdieu, rather than through Gramsci. An aspect that is developed in the last part of this section.

Finally, another Gramscian analytical tool deployed for studying Middle East regional politics is his conceptualisation of ideology. This offers a valuable insight for grasping the ideational forms of power that support the dominant groups in the Middle East both domestically and internationally, an aspect that is missed by both realists and constructivists. For instance, the Iranian regime’s political power rests on its capacity to mobilise marginalised social classes through redistributive economic policies and a populist and anti-imperialist ideology (Stein, 2017). Foreign policy behaviour is thus explained as a strategy of reproduction of this ideology internationally and regionally. This would explain both the initial support for the Arab Spring, since, at the beginning, the uprisings mostly threatened regimes aligned with the US, and the change in the attitude occurred with the outbreak of the Syrian crisis. In this view, backing Bashar al-Assad was more than a move necessary to prevent a shift in the balance of power in favour of Saudi Arabia (or Israel). Rather, for the core of the Iranian regime, al-Assad was useful as an integral part of the ‘axis of refusal’, which ‘serves domestic-power interests for regimes by reinforcing ideological hegemony’ (ibid, pp. 678–679). Therefore, according to this framework, the Iranian regime has developed a form of ‘ideological co-dependency’ with other regional actors such as the al-Assad regime and Hezbollah (ibid.). A similar situation concerns the AKP and its support for the Muslim Brotherhood (Stein, 2021, p. 17). Drawing upon these considerations, and combining Gramsci with Althusser’s work on ideology, Stein advances the category of ‘ideological externalisation’ to explain how Middle Eastern regimes use foreign policy ‘to augment, or compensate for the limitations of, domestic policy in shoring up domestic support’ (ibid, p. 1). In this way, he argues that the sources of the regional patterns of cooperation and conflict can be found in the hegemonic strategies of the ruling classes of the main regional powers (ibid.). This analysis is also applied in the case of the Arab Spring, where, Stein argues, the AKP’s bid to reshape the regional order through the Muslim Brotherhood and political Islam has been halted by the counterrevolutionary strategies of the Saudi regime and Iranian conservatives (see ibid, pp. 183–208).

My Bourdieu-inspired approach bears some similarities with this stream of literature. The main reason lies in some theoretical aspects that Bourdieu shares with historical materialism and, in
particular, with historical sociology. One of these aspects can be found in his interest for socio-historical transformation, which led some scholars to suggest that Bourdieu could be understood as a historical sociologist (Calhoun, 2013). Another aspect is his view that political ideas are rooted in the social background of the political agents, which thus explain the close relation between political representation and discourses on the one hand and class struggle on the other (Bourdieu, 1991b, pp. 180–183). In this sense, Bourdieu shares similar theoretical assumptions with Gramsci, since both emphasise the cultural and symbolic aspects of the domination of the ruling classes instead of focusing solely on the possession of the means of production like the most orthodox Marxist theories (compare Burawoy, 2012, pp. 51–66).

Nevertheless, there are also significant differences between Bourdieu and the rest of neo-Marxist tradition, including Gramsci. Bourdieu, through his criticism of Marxist monodimensionality, according to which the political phenomenon are ultimately explained directly or indirectly through the mode of economic production, makes a case for the separation (both ontological and analytical) between class and political struggles (Bourdieu, 1991b, pp. 244-245). In other words, Bourdieu does not deny that a relation, also intimate, between the social classes and political parties exists. However, he contends that such a relationship is not organic or intrinsic to the very functioning of politics; rather it is filtered by the specific and autonomous logic of the political struggle (see Bourdieu, 1991b). Thus, domestic politics and, as its externalisation, foreign policy are not necessarily the expression of class struggle or of the ideology of the dominant class, as historical sociological and historical materialist accounts, Gramscian ones included, contend. Instead, they reflect a realm in which class struggle is dissipated in a competition between different forms of representation. The domestic political struggle is, for Bourdieu, a struggle over classifications and forms of representation among different positions in an ideational space (compare Burawoy, 2012). In other words, it is a struggle among competing ideas and visions of the social world.

This understanding of the political struggle offers an interesting perspective on Middle Eastern politics during the Arab Spring. A good example of this is represented by the Turkish case, wherein historical materialist and historical sociological assumptions of foreign policy as intimately connected with the mode of economic production (such as in the cases of Tuğal and Yalvaç), or as the externalisation of the ideology of the dominant economic class are challenged. While Turkey’s regional policy before the uprisings was characterised by the creation of market opportunities for the bourgeoisie –at the point that some analyst referred to Turkey as a ‘trading state’ (Kirişci, 2009) – after 2011 the AKP reorganised its discourse
around the necessity to promote democracy in the region, thus jeopardising the country’s trade relations in the Middle East (like in the cases of Syria and Libya). The explanation for this behaviour clearly cannot be found in the preferences of a social class that benefited from the previous regional posture. In this sense, the AKP was never a passive tool of Turkish bourgeoisie, and the fulfilment of this class’ interests was only functional to the enhancement of the party’s position in the political game. Thus, to grasp the AKP’s foreign policy during the Arab Spring, it is necessary to consider the dispositions that the AKP internalised in that game, which Bourdieu conceptualises as habitus. Here, it is the imposition of a vision of political order, rather than class domination, that is at stake. Therefore, foreign policy during the Arab Spring was not ideological – in a neo-Marxist sense – but symbolic.

Bourdieu’s contribution

The nuanced interpretation of the relationship between class struggle and political struggle makes Bourdieu particularly useful in analysing Middle East politics during the Arab Spring. While the relationship between regimes and their social bases is crucial in understanding foreign policy behaviour, this should be considered though the lens of a struggle between competing narratives (or ideologies) that develops nationally and internationally. The events of 2010–2011 paved the way for a redefinition of principles of governance, of the relationship between Islam and politics and, ultimately, on what can be considered as legitimate or illegitimate political discourse and practice throughout the Middle East political space. In responding to these developments, political agents in Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia articulated their foreign policies through the mobilisation of symbolic resources that were the product of their national political discourses, categories and struggles. In this view, the AKP’s bid to impose its own political model on post-revolutionary Arab states has been shaped by the party’s historical and political trajectory, in which the adoption of a “democratic discourse” served as a means to legitimise its position within the secular Turkish political space. Therefore, Turkish foreign policy during the Arab Spring was not just a vehicle for a hegemonic religious bourgeoisie but also an instrument for the “universalisation” of a particular political discourse.
Iranian and Saudi strategies can be understood in a similar fashion. A democratic drift of the Arab Spring would have weakened the political discourses of Iranian conservatives and Saudi royal family and, therefore, their political legitimacy. In confronting this eventuality, they adopted foreign policy discourses that promoted the ideational structures that underpin their domestic power in the region. Thus, Iranian conservatives supported an anti-imperialist interpretation of the events (the “Islamic Awakening” discourse), while the Saudi regime worked to weaken the legitimacy and appeal of the revolutions through various means (by, for example, equating the Muslim Brotherhood to terrorist organisations and supporting a sectarian discourse). As a result of adopting these discourses, a competition between three political visions emerged in regional politics, which in turn further affected the national politics of these countries, as if this regional battle of ideas was a constant presence in internal political discourses.

In conclusion, as Adler-Nissen argues, ‘Bourdieu helps us rediscover the everyday practices, symbolic structures and arenas of conflict that bring many other actors into perspective, rather than just focusing on nation states that produce (what we call) international politics’ (2013a, p. 1). This aspect of the French sociologist’s unique contribution to IR resonates in the study of foreign policy behaviour, where Bourdieu helps us to appreciate how domestic power struggles shape international politics. His theoretical apparatus does this by reconceptualising domestic politics through the lens of the political field, thus allowing an investigation of the positions of the actors who deploy foreign policy discourses within their domestic configurations of power. As I illustrate in this thesis, especially in the Saudi case, the concept of political field can be integrated with the field of power, which put political agents in relation (or in competition) with economic, social and religious ones in the struggle for the domination of the state. Simultaneously, the international realm is conceptualised as a political space where discourses, ideas and categories circulate among different national political fields. Therefore, as I explain the next chapter (see 1.2), the international (or, in this case, the Middle East) is not analysed as an autonomous field with its own specific “rules of the game”, and, thus, the agents’ actions are “regulated” by the specific conditions of the national fields. In this space, what is at stake, is the imposition of a particular visions of the political order as “universal”, an endeavour that allow a political agent to influence the dynamics of other political fields, thus exercising power beyond their national arena. To sum up, my Bourdieusian approach to international politics sees foreign policy practices as strategies for both maintaining (or enhancing) the positions of political agents in a domestic political arena and exercising political power at the international
level. These two interrelated dynamics feature prominently in foreign policy discourses in Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia, which are key to the understanding of Middle East politics during the Arab Spring.

Methodology

Ontological and epistemological foundations of the research

The research design of this project is built to be consistent with Bourdieu’s ontological and epistemological assumptions. The “great mission” of Bourdieu’s sociological work is to overcome ‘all the oppositions that artificially divide social science’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 25): objectivism and subjectivism; symbolic and material dimensions; interpretation and explanation; agency and structure. His definition of ‘structural constructivism’ is a clear example of this. Although Bourdieu recognises the social world as socially constructed, he points out that there also exist ‘objective structures, independent of the consciousness or the will of agents, which are capable of orienting or constraining practices and representations’ (Bourdieu, 1987a, p. 147, as quoted in Jackson, 2008, p. 164). The process of social reproduction reflects this union between subjectivism and objectivism by demonstrating how arbitrary socially constructed categories seem to be natural and universal. Bourdieu explains this point in Practical Reason, using the following terms:

*Being rooted both in the objectivity of social structures and in the subjectivity of objectively orchestrated mental structures, [social categories] present themselves to experience with the opacity and resistance of things, although they are the product of acts of construction, which, as a certain ethno methodological critique suggests, apparently relegate them to the nonexistence of pure figments of thought. [...] The circle is that of reproduction of the social order. The near-perfect match that is then set up between the subjective and objective*
categories provides the foundation for an experience of the world as self-evident taken for granted (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 67; see also Bourdieu, 1996b, p.21).

Another aspect of Bourdieu’s ontology is the rejection of the ‘substantialist mode of thinking’, which ‘treats the properties attached to agents – occupation, age, sex, qualifications – as forces independent of the relationship within which they act’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 22). This point unites Bourdieu with other relational sociologists. Substantialism includes all those paradigms that explicitly or implicitly support the ontological priority of the structure or of the agent, thus reifying the attributes of the individuals or groups and abstracting them from social and historical contexts (this concerns first of all positivism but also methodological individualism, phenomenology, existentialism or structuralism). On his part, Bourdieu does not consider structure and agent as ‘two distinct poles, with ontological autonomy, but different forms of a single space of relations’ (see Paolucci, 2009, pp. 80–84, my translation).

Epistemology is also affected by the rejection of the subjectivism/objectivism dichotomy. Bourdieu’s approach is influenced by Gaston Bachelard’s applied rationalism, which can be summed up by the premise that ‘the fact is won, constructed and confirmed’ (Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron, 1991, p. 11). In this framework, ‘scientific propositions are won in the sense that they are achieved through a break with everyday or common sense appearances; they are constructed through what is always a theoretical act; and they are confirmed by the criterion of “fidelity to the real”’ (Kale-Lostuvali, 2016, p. 278; see also Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron, 1991, p. 66). These ‘three research operations (breaking with common sense appearances, construction and validation)’ are situated in an ‘epistemological hierarchy’, in which ‘the break with appearances informs construction and construction informs validation’ (ibid.; see also Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron, 1991, p. 11).

Therefore, Bourdieu’s epistemic orientation does not necessarily rule out the possibility of explaining, rather than interpreting, social phenomena. This is possible through an exercise of reflexivity on the part of the researcher. This a central point in Bourdieu’s sociological project, which is deeply concerned with the dangers of ‘scholastic bias’ (Bourdieu, 1998, p.137), that is, the researcher’s tendency to ‘stand back’ and analyse the social world as if they are somehow not involved in the processes under observation (see Jackson, 2009, p. 112). To overcome the distorting effects that arise from this bias, Bourdieu exhorts researchers to subject the research
process itself (the tools as well as the findings) in a constant analysis to engage in what he calls ‘epistemic reflexivity’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 36). ‘In this way, […] it is possible to “objectivise” one’s own subjectivity and thus limit the distortion that arises from the inescapable fact that knowledge construction is a social activity’ (Jackson, 2009, p. 112; see also Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 36–46).

Following these ontological and epistemological assumptions, I have tried to “rethink” the object of my analysis in terms of the analytic concepts of habitus and field, which Bourdieu has elaborated for overcoming the objectivism/subjectivism dichotomy. Therefore, I have analysed the positions within the field and the objective structure of relations between these positions that are occupied by agents who compete for field-specific capital. I have then examined the historical development of the habitus of the agents, which underpins their practices. Finally, I have underlined the causal constellations of mechanisms that have produced events by analysing the interactions between the evolving field and the habitus of the agents.

After a meticulous study of Bourdieu’s works, as well as of works using a Bourdieusian framework (see, for example, Grenfell and James, 2004; and Itçaina, Roger and Smith, 2016), I opted for a case study approach. Case studies offer the possibility of identifying and comparing relational structures. In addition, case studies are especially suited to identify causal mechanisms when one allocates empirical knowledge into a theoretical framework (Gerring, 2004). Furthermore, case studies are capable of analysing social phenomena from different angles through a wide range of methods, including primary and secondary documents (Yin, 1994, p. 14). Finally, case studies often have been deployed to develop new theories and approaches (King, Verba and Keohane, 1994; Gerring, 2004; Bryman, 2012). This makes case study particularly relevant to my research. As explained above, the choice of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia is justified by their significance in shaping regional politics through their action. This made them the ideal case studies for exploring the impact of internal political struggles in the making of regional politics. Throughout the analysis, the three case studies are not treated separately. This reflects the ontological premise of my research, according to which a social phenomenon cannot be understood separately from the structure. In this case, this implies that for having a complete understanding of the regional policy of one country, it is necessary to consider it in relation to other positions in the regional political space.
Data collection and analysis

In conducting my research, I have focused my attention on developing a research design that reflects both the aims of the thesis and its theoretical, ontological and epistemological premises. The aim of the research is to determine whether and how domestic politics shape foreign policy behaviour. In particular, I am interested in exploring the case of the Arab Spring, which questioned the political status quo in the region and put the issues of political legitimacy, including the issue of democracy and the role of religion, at the centre of the regional debate. Considering this changing external environment, the question is whether the ways regional powers address these issues at home determined their behaviour towards the unfolding events. This thesis addresses this puzzle by looking at the three main states in the Muslim Middle East: Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Specifically, we might ask: Did the AKP’s religious background and democratic reformism in the 2000s shape Turkish foreign policy during the Arab Spring? Did the Iranian theocratic regime and its anti-imperialist political rhetoric affect Tehran’s position towards the uprisings? Did the Saudi monarchical and authoritarian system of governance determine its approach?

Discourse analysis is extremely useful for such a project. Discourses are not just mere rhetoric or ways that agents make sense of the social world; rather, they are constitutive of social action. As Neumann argues, a discourse ‘produces preconditions for action’ (Neumann, 2008a, p. 62). Discourse analysis broadens our understanding of foreign policy by demonstrating how foreign policy actors socially construct international politics. As Ripley notes, discourses are ‘a powerful tool to set agendas, produce meaning, legitimize interests, and enforce power structures’ (Ripley, 2017). Moreover, discourse analysis fits with my Bourdieu-inspired theoretical framework, since an analysis of the political field is mainly focused on the discourses produced by political professionals (see Bourdieu, 1991b). In carrying out a discourse analysis, I conceptualise a discourse as ‘a cohesive ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorizations about a specific object that frame that object in a certain way’, thus delimiting ‘the possibilities for acting in relation to it’ (Epstein 2011, p. 181).

The objects of examination of a discourse analysis are utterances (Neumann, 2008a, p. 63). These can be texts such as written statements, speeches and other signs. In my work, I focused on public speeches and government statements, often taken from newspapers and official news agencies, to detect how political actors deliver their messages to a broader national and regional audience. Following the steps of other researchers using a ‘Bourdieu-informed discursive
analysis’ (Nolan, 2016; see also Sayer, 2017), my comprehension of these data is not limited
to the language-based and textual description (see Nolan, 2016). Rather, I have tried to analyse
the three case studies in relation to both the changing Middle Eastern context and the structure
of the national political fields. In this way, I aim to go beyond the meaning of the political
discourse itself and to understand how political actors challenge or defend the classifications
and categories of the regional and political order (compare Sayer, 2017).

In addition to the analysis of utterances, my research relies also on extant knowledge on the
international politics of the Middle East as well as on the internal political discourse and foreign
policy of the countries under analysis. This approach, also known as secondary analysis or
secondary research, consists of an analysis of previously collected data to tackle issues and
research questions that differ from those of the primary research (Hinds, Vogel and Clarke-
Steffen, 1997, p. 408). In recent years, different arguments have been put forward in favour of
this approach, including hypothesis testing and theory development (Curtis and Curtis, 2011,
pp. 224, 234; Heaton, 2019). It can do that by reanalysing existing data set ‘by focusing on a
concept that seemed to be present but was not specifically addressed in the primary analysis’
(Hinds, Vogel and Clarke-Steffen, 1997, p. 410; see also Heaton, 2008, p. 39). In this case, the
Arab Spring, as well as the foreign policies of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia, have been the
objects of numerous studies in recent years. This extant literature, which includes books, peer-
reviewed journal articles and research centre reports, has so far produced an overwhelming
quantity of data on the topics. In this research, this existing material is reanalysed and
reinterpreted through the conceptual lens of Bourdieu’s field theory.

Structure of the thesis

Overall, the thesis is divided in five chapters. Chapter 1 outlines the theoretical framework of
the thesis. In doing so, it unfolds in three parts. First, it offers an overview of Bourdieu’s field-
thoretical approach. It presents the core concepts of Bourdieu’s field theory – namely, field,
habitus, doxa and capital – to then introduce the main analytical tool of the research: the
political field. Second, it discusses the issue of the conceptualisation of the “international” in
the current research agenda on Bourdieu in IR. After taking into consideration different works
and approaches, it suggests an analysis of Middle Eastern politics based on Bourdieu’s works
on the global circulation of ideas. Third, it examines the issue of change and continuity in
Bourdieu’s theory. Eventually, it suggests that the symbolic struggle over the Arab Spring can be understood as a kind of doxic battle.

Chapter 2 offers a historical analysis of the formation of the political fields in Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. It emphasises two aspects of this process. The first is the genesis of the field, which determines the field’s doxa and, therefore, the nature of the political struggle. This depends on the simultaneous construction of the field of power (which encompasses the political field) and on the conformation of the social universe as well as on the relations between political agents and social groups. The second aspect is the composition of the field, which is crucial to understand the practices and discourses of the political agents both in the field and in the international political space. Once established, the political game becomes autonomous from the rest of the social universe. To accumulate political capital, the agents deploy discourses aimed at mobilising segments of the society behind principles of vision and division of the social world. Chapter 2 is divided into three main sections. The first discusses the Turkish case. It starts with a brief analysis of the construction of the Turkish political field and then illustrates the strategy of accumulation of political capital adopted by the AKP. The second discusses the Iranian case. It analyses the genesis of the political field of the Islamic Republic and then presents an overview of the structure of the field. The third discusses Saudi Arabia and explains how the relation between the political and religious fields has affected power struggles in the Kingdom. Through this analysis, Chapter 2 explains how the dynamics of the political field affect foreign policy.

Chapter 3 deals with the impact of the outbreak of the Arab Spring on Turkish and Iranian regional policies. Specifically, it considers their foreign policy discourses during the initial phase of the Arab Spring from 2011 to 2013. Following Villumsen Villumsen Berling (2012), it conceptualises this type of events as a ‘doxic battle’, which refers to a period of uncertainty in which the doxa is questioned, thus opening the possibility for fundamental change (ibid.). The decision to focus on Turkey and Iran, and not on Saudi Arabia, is justified by the proactive approach adopted by Ankara and Tehran during the initial period of the uprisings, in contrast to the Saudis’ initial cautious approach. As the events of the Arab Spring began, the end of the political status quo in the Middle East seemed inevitable, thus favouring agents with a different type of political capital. Facing these developments, both Turkish and Iranian political agents tried to impose their principles of vision and division, which were the products of their respective domestic political experience, as the new doxa of the post-revolutionary political fields. The analysis is divided in three parts. First, it offers an overview of the relations between
the changing Middle East scenario before the Arab Spring and the struggles in the political fields of Turkey and Iran. In particular, it explores the emergence and development of the AKP’s democratic-religious principle by focusing on how foreign policy discourses were a crucial part of the party’s strategy of accumulating political capital at home, as well as how this internal success enhanced its prestige in regional politics. Moreover, this section also illustrates the loss of prestige and democratic credentials suffered by the Iranian political agents in power during the controversial 2009 elections. This is followed by an illustration of the Turkish and Iranian reaction to the uprisings. Then, this chapter puts in relation the Turkish–Iranian competition with the developments of the other political fields in the Middle East political space to provide a more nuanced understanding of the initial success of the so-called Turkish model.

Chapter 4 deals with the impact of the so-called “counterrevolution” on the doxic battle for the Arab Spring by focusing on the July 2013 coup in Egypt and on the repression of the uprising in Syria, which soon escalated into a civil war. Here the actions of the Saudi regime became more relevant in explaining the developments in regional politics, thus more space is dedicated to Riyadh. In this chapter, I connect the “logic of counterrevolution” to the logics of the national political fields in Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran, thus demonstrating how the internal power struggles are externalised, or exported, in the doxic battle for defining the “legitimate principle” of political legitimacy and regional order. The analysis unfolds in three parts. First, it provides a contextualisation of the national and regional strategies adopted by the Saudi political elite and by the AKP. Second, it analyses the doxic battle in the aftermath of the coup in Egypt. Third, it analyses the changing strategies of accumulating political capital adopted as a response to the Syrian crisis, thus dealing with the sectarianisation of regional political discourse.

Chapter 5 assesses whether, and to what extent, the regional dynamics unfolded by the Arab Spring has had an impact on the strategies of accumulation of political capital in the Turkish, Iranian and Saudi political fields. Finally, the conclusion presents the key findings of the thesis. It then discusses the possible future applications of the Bourdieu-inspired theoretical model developed by the research.
Chapter 1

Theoretical framework: Outline of a Bourdieusian approach to foreign policy

Since the 2000s, Bourdieu’s ideas and concepts have gained momentum in the study of IR. So far, the contribution of Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory can be found in many areas of the discipline. This also regards meta-theoretical issues, which are contributions that Bourdieu’s reflexive epistemology can possibly offer to the study of the discipline (Pouliot and Mérand, 2012; see also Leander, 2002). However, the greatest impact of Bourdieu’s ideas can be found within the so-called ‘practice turn’ in the social sciences (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina and von Savigny, 2001), which also affects IR (Adler and Pouliot, 2011). This trend is not limited only to Bourdieu but also includes an increasing interest in other authors, such as Alain Badiou, Luc Boltanski, Michel de Certeau, Bruno Latour, Michel Foucault, Anthony Giddens and Ann Swindler, to name just a few. However, Bourdieu’s theory of practice has been regarded as the most influential within the discipline. The reason can be found in Bourdieu’s capacity to provide the analytical tools to rethink many aspects of IR. In this vein, Adler-Nissen affirms that ‘Bourdieu helps us rediscover the everyday practices, symbolic structures and arenas of conflict that bring many other actors into perspective, rather than just focusing on nation states that produce (what we call) international politics’ (2013a, p. 1).

The impact of Bourdieu’s ideas on international studies can be found, for instance, in security analysis (see, among others, Bigo, 2005; Mérand, 2006), international law (Madsen, 2006), or in the analysis of practices in diplomacy (Adler-Nissen, 2008; Neumann, 2008b). However, the full potential of Bourdieu’s sociology in IR is far from reached. A clear example is provided by the study of states’ foreign policy behaviour, where an approach based on Bourdieu’s relational sociology has the potential to delineate a theoretically informed connection between domestic/internal power struggles and external ones, thus bridging the gap between mainstream IR structural theories and agent-centred approaches. In this chapter, I outline a Bourdieu-
inspired field-theoretic approach to the production of foreign policy discourses, which I then deploy to make sense of the behaviour of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia during the Arab Spring. The main analytical tool of this approach is the concept of political field as delineated in the works of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly in Language and Symbolic Power (Bourdieu, 1991b). To expand from the national to the international dimension, I draw upon Bourdieu’s works on the international circulation of ideas and other Bourdieu-inspired literature in IR to build a conceptualisation of the Middle East as a political space, in which models of governances and ideas circulate among different national political fields.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, I provide an overview of Bourdieu’s theory and start with an explanation of the main concepts of the field theory. I then illustrate the functioning of the political field. Second, I elucidate the Bourdieu-inspired theoretical basis for the conceptualisation of the international dimension and of the relationship between the national and the international. Third, I briefly discuss the issue of continuity and change in Bourdieu. This provides an understanding of the “battle of the models” in the Arab Spring as a sort of “doxic battle”. Finally, I outline the conclusions.

1.1 Bourdieu’s field theory and the political field

1.1.1 Bourdieu’s core concepts

In his work, Bourdieu suggests that the social world is divided into a series of relatively autonomous social universes, which he calls fields. These are both networks of ‘objective relations between positions’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 97) and arenas where different agents – endowed with field-specific capital – struggle for domination. An agent can achieve domination by actively preserving existing power relations, enhancing its own position, or transforming the field itself (ibid, p. 104). In this sense, it is crucial to note the importance that power relations and power struggles have in defining the field. As Bourdieu explains, every field is a ‘field of struggle’, where the object of the actors’ desire, and even the boundaries of the field itself, are at stake (ibid, pp. 101–104). The power relations within the field are determined by the distribution of field-specific forms of capital. A significant aspect of innovation in Bourdieu’s theory is the extension of this concept beyond the material dimension. According to Bourdieu, there are three main ‘species’ of capital (ibid, p. 119). The first is economic capital, “which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights” (Bourdieu, 1986, p.242). The second is social
capital, which is ‘the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.119.). The third is cultural capital, which can be objectified (in material objects, such as books, paintings, etc.), institutionalised (in the form of education qualifications) or embodied (religious learning, language skills, etc.) (ibid.; see also Dodge, 2020, p. 111). To these we must also add various ‘subspecies’ (Nexon and Neumann, 2018, p. 667), which vary according to the different fields; for instance, in the religious field, religious capital, which is a form of cultural capital, is accepted as a “currency”.

A special mention should also be given to symbolic capital, which is the most important form of capital in Bourdieu’s work. This can be defined as ‘the acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability that are easily converted into political positions’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 291). Thus, symbolic capital disguises the perpetration of an act of power by presenting it as ‘legitimate demands for recognition, deference, obedience, or the services of others’ (Swartz, 1997, p.43). The accumulation of this “supreme” form of capital allows for the exercise of symbolic power, defined as the ‘invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even themselves exercise it’ (Bourdieu, 1991b, p. 164). The social agent, who is in the position of exercising symbolic power, is thus in the position of imposing the ‘legitimate vision of the social world and of its divisions’ (Bourdieu, 1987b, p. 13). In turn, the agent can camouflage its own privileged position under a mantle of legitimacy. As Guzzini (2013) points out, the possession of symbolic capital depends on recognition. The accumulation of symbolic capital works through a “conversion” of one of the three other species of capital (or subspecies, depending on the field), which occurs through a tacit agreement between the dominant and the dominated. In other words, symbolic capital is the form that any capital can take once it is recognised within the field as a valid currency (Guzzini, 2013, p. 81).

To compete in a field, agents must acquire a sense of the “game”. This is habitus, a system of durable and transportable dispositions (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72) created and formulated through ‘the conjuncture of objective structures and [the] personal history’ of the agent (Mahar, Harker and Wilkes, 1990, p. 10, as quoted in Akdeniz and Göker, 2011, p. 316). Habitus works simultaneously as a ‘structured structure’ and a ‘structuring structure’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72, 1984, p. 170), in the sense that it is shaped by the field while also generating and organising practices and discourses in accordance with the structure of the field. Thus, the concept of
habitus cannot be separated from the field. Their relationship is the pillar of Bourdieu’s theory of social practice, which can be simplified according to this formula: ‘[(habitus) + (capital)] + field = practice’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101). Therefore, according to Bourdieu, social action is neither the result of a unilateral imposition of the structure nor of the agent’s free will. Rather, it is produced by ‘the constructed relationship between habitus and field(s)’, that is, the relationship between ‘the social constitution of the agent’ and ‘the makeup of the particular social universe within which she operates, as well as the particular conditions under which they come to encounter and impinge upon each other’ (Wacquant, 2008, p. 268). The functioning of the field relies on a set of taken-for-granted beliefs called doxa. Doxa is an unconscious sharing of knowledge or internalised rules of the game, through which agents perceive the social world as natural or ‘self-evident’ (see Bourdieu, 1977, p. 164). Despite being perceived as natural, the doxa reflects the power relations between the different positions of the agents in the field. Therefore, the rules of the field are not neutral, suggesting that the boundaries of the field itself are at stake in the struggle.

Although doxa is taken for granted by the actors, this does not mean that there is no room for contestation within the field. As Bourdieu argues, ‘[t]he dominated classes have an interest in pushing back the limits of doxa and exposing the arbitrariness of the taken for granted’ (ibid., p. 169). He refers to this position as heterodoxy (see ibid.). Against this strategy, ‘the dominant classes have an interest in defending the integrity of doxa or, short of this, of establishing in its place the necessarily imperfect substitute, orthodoxy’ (ibid., p. 169, italics in the original). The struggle between orthodox and heterodox positions in the field depends on the capacity of the agents to convert field-specific capital to symbolic capital. A good example of this conflict is represented by the confrontation between Principlists (conservatives) and Reformists in the Iranian political field. As Ansari (2016) notes, the Guardianship of the Jurist is the doxa of the Iranian political field. This is widely accepted by both factions, which pledge their allegiance to this principle and to the Supreme Leader, the institution that embodies the Guardianship. However, as I illustrate more than once throughout this thesis, they adopt a different interpretation of the principle as well as of the prerogatives of the faqih. The Principlists support the “purest” version of the principle, thus recognising the Supreme Leader as the most important authority within the political system. On their part, the Reformists support a heterodox interpretation of the role of the Leader, thus in certain instances reducing this role to that of a “special adviser”, while elected officials (the President and the Parliament) are seen as the most legitimate bodies in shaping the political course of action. Therefore, although both
positions agree on the doxa, they propose two different interpretations of it, that is, two different *principles of vision and division*. This concept will be presented in the following subsection, where I illustrate the *political field*.

### 1.1.2 Introducing the political field

The *political field* can be defined as the field in which political actors – mainly, but not exclusively, parties and professional politicians – struggle for domination (Davis, 2010, p. 206; Dodge, 2018, p. 29). The nature of this struggle consists of mobilising the population behind ‘forms of representation and self-representation’ (Thompson, 1991, p. 28) or ‘principles of vision and division’ (Bourdieu, 1991b, p.224, see also Bourdieu, 2005, pp.36-39; and Dodge, 2018, p. 29) in exchange for political support in the form of “credit” or “prestige”. Through this exchange, agents accumulate political capital, which can be described as a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991b, p. 192) that can be used by political agents to preserve or challenge a particular configuration of the socio-political order. The functioning of the political field, as well as that of other fields, relies on the common acceptance of an ordering principle (doxa) which influences the actors. This principle is hardly questioned by actors, yet it is not immutable or unchallengeable, and the previously discussed difference between orthodox and heterodox positions is an example of how the field’s doxa could be put under pressure and change. An important aspect in understanding the possibility of change in the structure of the political field is the permeability of the field itself. Although the political field has a certain degree of autonomy, it is not independent from other forces and fields, such as the economic and the cultural ones. This is because political actors must appeal to groups or forces outside the political field to mobilise the population behind their particular representation of the social world (compare Bourdieu, 1991b, p. 183). The necessity to mobilise different segments of the population for accumulating political capital may lead to trans-field alliances between political and other social actors, in which political power is used to guarantee certain positions in other fields in exchange of forms of cultural, economic and symbolic support.

While using the political field as the main analytical tool of this research, it is necessary to make an important clarification: the political field is not the state. For Bourdieu, the state is ‘an ensemble of administrative and bureaucratic fields […] within which agents and categories of agents, governmental and nongovernmental, struggle over this peculiar form of authority
consisting of the power to rule via legislation, regulations, administrative measures’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 111). What is at stake in this ensemble of fields is ‘the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence’, that is, ‘the power to constitute and to impose as universal and universally applicable within a given “nation” […] a common set of coercive norms’ (ibid, p.112). In other words, the state is a sort of ‘meta-field’ (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 311) encompassing all the social fields while tying them together through the distribution of a specific form of capital. This is defined by Bourdieu as ‘meta-capital’, a form of capital ‘capable of exercising a power over other species of power, and particularly over their rate of exchange (and thereby over the balance of power between their respective holders),’ and which ‘defines the specific power of the state’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 114). In this sense, the concept of state is connected with the concept of field of power, which regulates the struggle over the state.

This latter can be defined ‘as the space of play in which holders of various forms of capital struggle in particular for power over the state’ (ibid). In other words, the field of power is a field that contains other fields, such as the political, economic and cultural ones. Agents from these fields enter in the field of power in order to increase the value, in terms of ‘conversion rate’ or ‘exchange rate’, using Bourdieu’s own words (Bourdieu, 1996a, p.265), of the capital at their disposal. This operation usually works through the establishment of strong relations between agents belonging to different fields, but with converging agendas and objectives, and, thus, with an interest in “exchanging” capitals. These “exchanges”, or trans-field alliances, may create, or are often facilitated by, the existence of a homology. This can be defined as a form of resemblance between different fields or agents, or, as Bourdieu says, ‘a resemblance within a difference’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 106). This concept is explained by taking as an example the structural homology ‘between the field of ideological production and the field of social classes’, which ‘means that struggles over the specific objects of the autonomous field [of ideological reproduction] automatically produce euphemized forms of the economic and political struggles between classes’ (Bourdieu, 1991b, pp. 168-169).

In order to understand the functioning of the field of power and of homology we can consider the Saudi case (see 2.3). Here one group, the royal family, dominates the political field. However, domination in this field is not enough to ensure domination over the state. To ensure that, this group deploys its political capital, in forms of narratives, but also in forms of legislative actions, in order to mobilise other forms of capitals in other fields, thus “converting” their political capital in these other forms. Thus, universities and think tanks that receive funds from the government produce only research outputs supporting the regime, businessmen that
support the regime obtain lucrative contracts and religious personalities that “emphasise” the “Islamic legitimacy” of the existing political order get the most prestigious positions in state-sponsored religious institutions. In particular, the exchange between the political and religious fields is facilitated by the presence of a homology between the position of the Saudi royal family and the Wahhabi clergy in their respective fields. Accordingly, the mode of reproduction of the latter reflects the logic of the political struggle, thus translating every challenge to the political authority to a breach of the religious order (a point that is developed in 2.3). This exchange puts the political field in a unique position in the field of power, as the dominant political group is able, through these interventions, to establish the relative value of every forms of capital. In this way, the Saudi royal family exerts control over the social universe and, consequently, over the state.

By adopting the concept of field of power and a Bourdieusian understanding of the state, my work rejects the idea of state agency, according to which the state is analysed as a unitary actor. In this sense, my work differs with structuralist approaches, whether neorealist or of other type, including some using Bourdieu’s concepts. For instance, in their analysis of Turkey as an emerging middle power, Ongur and Zengin (2016) advance the idea of using Bourdieu’s concept of habitus in order to understand the relationship between states and the international structure. Here, they argue that, similar to individuals, also states develop habitus (Ibid, p.118). Although this analysis presents some stimulating aspect, I contend that this state-centric application of the concept of habitus raises some theoretical issues. Indeed, as Bigo reminds us, for Bourdieu, the ‘state is not an actor’ but rather one of the many arenas for power struggles (Bigo, 2011, p. 248). Consequently, when examining foreign policy discourses, we must consider them as not as an action performed by the state but as the social action performed by that specific actor (politicians, bureaucrats, professionals, etc.). Does it mean that the state is not relevant in the construction of foreign relations? Actually the state, as a meta-field, plays an important role in the making of the international realm (on this, compare McCourt, 2021). In my work, however, the state plays only an indirect role, since it can be argued that the political struggle for the imposition of a principle of vision and division is part of a wider struggle for the possession of the state’s meta-capital; the case of the construction of the Saudi state is a good example of that (as I illustrate later in the thesis). Moreover, the configuration of the state’s meta-field shapes the modality of the political struggle. Bourdieu explains this point in *Pascalian Meditations*:
By its very existence, the institution of the State as the holder of the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence sets a limit on the symbolic struggle of all against all for this monopoly (that is, for the right to impose one’s own principle of vision), thereby removing a certain number of divisions and principles of division from this struggle (Bourdieu, 2000, p.186).

Therefore, the historical conditions of the construction of the state are understood as important in determining the limits of the struggle over the legitimate principle of vision of the political order. Nevertheless, as explained in the introduction, the scope of the research is to examine the regional political debate over the different models of governance in the Middle East and how they are linked to foreign policy discourses in Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. In doing so, this research is not particularly preoccupied with role of the state (and other bureaucratic fields associated with the state, such as the diplomatic field), since the political field, as ‘the site par excellence in which agents seek to form and transform their visions of the world and thereby the world itself’ (Thompson, 1991, p. 26), is the most relevant lens for understanding this competition over the legitimate principle of governance in the Middle East.

The Bourdieusian concept of political field has been used in the study of Middle East politics. In particular, an analysis based on the political field offers a valuable relational insight on the development of identities within politics. For instance, Eylem Akdeniz and Emrah Göker (2011) deploy this analytical tool to study the historical trajectory of Turkish nationalism from the establishment of the Republic to the rise of the AKP. Their argument stresses that from the beginning of the Republic to the rise of the AKP, nationalism, in its “Kemalist form”, established itself as the doxa of the political field. However, the dominant position of the orthodox secularist position started to decline when the political economic reforms of the 1980s encouraged changes in the economic and cultural fields (ibid.). Another example of the application of the concept of political field in the study of Middle East politics can be found in the already mentioned article by Mansour Ansari on the Islamic Republic of Iran (Ansari, 2016). Here, the author argues that the principle of Guardianship of the Jurist has functioned as the doxa of the Iranian political field. Moreover, he also highlights how the political field has imposed its doxa upon the rest of society by penetrating the religious, scientific, cultural and economic fields (ibid.). Furthermore, in an examination of the so-called ‘Sahwa intifada’ – that is, the Islamist protest against the deployment of US troops in Saudi territory during the 1991 Gulf War – Lacroix analyses the genesis of the Saudi political field (Lacroix, 2011, p. 8). On his part, Toby Dodge deploys the political field to develop an approach to Iraqi politics that
goes beyond sectarian cleavages (such as Sunni vs Shia or Arabs vs Kurds) and ethnocentrism (Dodge, 2018, 2020). In his analysis of the Iraqi political field, Dodge demonstrates that the key point of contention is the (re)definition of the very boundaries and membership of the field, and that the struggle over the imposition of different principles of vision is carried out through the mobilisation of symbolic resources (Dodge, 2018).

These examples offer an important insight on the contribution that the political field can offer to the study of Middle East politics. The works of Akdeniz and Göker, of Ansari, of Lacroix and of Dodge, show how identities, ideas and principles of governance are not fixed but that instead they are continuously shaped by the political struggles and power relations between different political actors. The tools through which these struggles are conducted are discourses, since language, with its capacity to ‘fix concepts and schemes’ (Guzzini, 2013, p. 82), is the link between power relations and the construction of social reality. It is through language and discourses that the principles of vision and division that regulate relations within the political field are created. In this sense, as Bourdieu highlights ‘language relations are always relations of symbolic power’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 142). Whoever dominates the production of political discourses is able to shape the political order. The main theoretical claim of this thesis is that this production also includes foreign policy discourses. In other words, foreign policy discourses like the “Turkish model” or the “Iranian model” serve as strategies for accumulating political capital. They are the product of the position of an agent within the political field and, as such, they reflect the agent’s habitus, as well as the principle of vision and division used to mobilise support from various segments of society. At the same time, by being directed to a foreign audience, these have a transformative power that goes beyond the national camp. Nonetheless, this theoretical claim needs to be further discussed. The following section provides the theoretical background for a Bourdieusian understanding of the relations between the national fields and the international/regional dimension.
1.2 Bourdieu and the international: the double game

Affirming that foreign policy discourses emerge from contestations and power struggles situated in the national level is not new in IR. In a certain sense, a similar argument has been advanced through different perspectives in foreign policy analysis (see, for instance, Cantir and Kaarbo, 2012; Kaarbo, 2015; or, for the Turkish case, Özdamar, 2016) or through constructivist approaches that pay attention to the internal construction of state identities (see, for instance Telhami and Barnett, 2002; or, for the Turkish case, Bozdağlıoğlu, 2003). Nevertheless, by analysing these struggles through the lens of the political field, it is possible to elaborate a historical and relational understanding of the conditions that produce foreign policy discourses. This allows the detection of the dynamics through which they change or are preserved. By studying the historical trajectory of an agent within the political field, it is possible to understand how its particular vision of the political order originates from relational dynamics in relation to other actors and the structure (the field). Through the conceptualisation of foreign policy discourses as political discourses, it is possible to treat the international dimension as a constant presence in the development of internal power struggles, thus appreciating how the actors’ position in the political field is key to their understanding of external events. In other words, the struggle within the political field determines the “official” (or legitimate) foreign policy discourse, which is part of the “official” political discourse. However, in the case of the “battle of models” in the Arab Spring, this argument does not tell the whole story. It is not sufficient to assess how the different models, or principles of vision, emerge from their respective national political field, but it is also necessary to appreciate how they interact with each other in the Middle Eastern political space. To do that, it is crucial to clarify how a field-theoretic approach conceives the relationship between the national political field and the regional/international dimension.

The issue of the conceptualisation of the “international” is to be carefully analysed when applying Bourdieu’s theoretical apparatus in IR. Bourdieu’s oeuvre is mainly focused on domestic arenas in European societies, in particular in France – although in the initial phase of his career, he focused on Algeria (Bourdieu, 1979) – where the habitus of the agent originated from past experiences and the belonging to a social class. This raises the important question of analytical nature, namely whether it is possible to study the international reality through international fields, or whether ‘international and transnational interactions are too loosely held together and continue to mirror nationally situated struggles’ (Guzzini, 2013, p. 89). The
challenge of deploying this type of analysis beyond the national (or local) dimension concerns all the practice-oriented approaches (Nexon and Pouliot, 2013, p. 344; Nexon and Neumann, 2018, p. 670). Nevertheless, as Nexon and Neumann note, Bourdieu himself points us in the direction of a macro-level field-theoretic analysis (Nexon and Neumann, 2018, p. 670). When describing the process of unification/concentration that constituted the state, Bourdieu mentions the possibility that a similar process is underway also at the global level:

"The process of concentration I have described is like a sheet with a recto and a verso side. The more you move towards universal unity, the more you delocalize and de-particularize [...], the more you move towards a unified state with a standard metre, more universal. People can understand one another, they can cross frontiers and communicate. Simultaneously, on the other side, there is national – and nationalist – concentration; the advance towards universalism is at the same time an advance towards the monopolization of the universal. At the level of relations between states you find the same problems that you find within the state" (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 160).

In other words, in the same way as the presence of local dimensions and actors does not affect the process of state unification, namely the monopolisation of the ‘legitimate symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.112), the existence of national realities does not affect the development of global fields. Adler-Nissen summarises these considerations by affirming that ‘a Bourdieusian analysis enables us to see that the international order is produced in much the same way as the domestic order’ (2013a, p.3). However, the problem of whether the international is autonomous from the national remains. If the answer is positive, then we can analyse the international dimension as a series of autonomous transnational fields regulated by their own logic and rules and thus “emancipated” from the various national contexts.

This analytical perspective has attracted great interest among scholars of European integration. This is somehow ironic, since Bourdieu himself sees the European Union as a mere part of the ‘neoliberal invasion’, functional to the destruction of the European welfare state (Mitrović, 2005). However, this has not discouraged researchers from deploying a Bourdieusian framework to explain the logic of European integration to show how this process can be seen as the institutionalisation of evolving autonomous transnational fields with their own principles, ideas, power relations and practices (Kauppi, 2003a, 2003b, 2013; Georgakakis and de Lassale, 2008; Adler-Nissen, 2011). For instance, Kauppi illustrates the emergence of a European political field through the example of the European Parliament. He notes how the
European Parliament has developed its own career path as well as its own forms of social capital and power relations. Therefore, he argues that Members of the European Parliament have developed their own practical sense independently from national parliaments and government (Kauppi, 2013, pp. 199–203). Similarly, Georgakakis and de Lassale hypothesise the emergence of an EU bureaucratic field, arguing that the civil servants in the European Commission have a certain autonomy from their respective national fields (Georgakakis and de Lassale, 2008).

A similar approach is adopted for Bourdieusian analyses of diplomacy and international security. In the first case, Adler-Nissen sees the emergence of a transnational field in interstate diplomacy. She argues that when diplomats and national representatives meet in the international arena, they engage a power struggle that is ‘relatively independent from the struggles within the domestic field’ (Adler-Nissen, 2013b, p.185). This struggle is regulated by an autonomous transnational field in which states or international organisations, through their representatives, compete to improve their power positions (ibid.; see also Adler-Nissen, 2008). Similarly, Mérand explains the emergence of a European security field ‘as a struggle between actors from the bureaucratic and military field, both at the national and at the regional (European) level’ (Pouliot and Mérand, 2013, p.35; see Mérand, 2006; 2010). Meanwhile, Bigo uses the concept of field of power to describe the dynamics within the field of global security, where professionals carry out a struggle over which issues should be securitised. According to Bigo, these transnational professionals have become increasingly independent from national bureaucracies and police forces. Therefore, he concludes that this ‘transnational field of power cannot be analysed as a coalescence of national fields of power contained by states’ (Bigo, 2013, p. 122; see also Bigo, 2005; 2011). This increasing autonomy is the result of an (ongoing) struggle between a ‘neo-modern’ conception of security, which emphasises universalism and global responsibility, and a more traditional one based on the strenuous defence of the principle of territoriability and national identity (Bigo, 2011, p. 254).

These analyses offer us useful tools to study different power struggles in world politics without recurring to an inter-state dimension. However, the existence of autonomous international fields should not be taken for granted, but rather it should be assessed empirically. In the case of Middle East politics during the Arab Spring, I have illustrated how the popular uprisings and subsequent collapse of Arab regimes (especially in Egypt) led to a competition between different models over the legitimate principle of governance. However, as argued in the previous section, and as I argue in the next chapter as well, the “promotion” of these three
models cannot be separated from the conditions of the national political fields that have generated them. Moreover, these discourses, as I show in the rest of the thesis, serve as tools for enhancing the position of the actors that produce them vis-à-vis other contenders in the political field. For instance, the “Turkish model discourse” cannot be understood without considering the historical conditions of the formation of the Turkish political field and the power struggle between the AKP and the Kemalist establishment. Therefore, the struggle over the legitimate principle of governance in the Middle East cannot be separated from the struggles in the national political fields. This leads us to dismiss the idea of studying Middle East politics as an autonomous international field and, therefore, to adopt a different approach, according to which the international (or, in this case, regional) is conceived as a political space where models of governance, ideas and political capital circulate among various national political fields. This political space does not possess the same level of “institutionalisation” of a field. Therefore, the interactions between the various agents are not enough autonomous to create a network with its own rules, specific forms of capital and a specific logic. Thus, the practices of political agents reflect struggles situated in the various national arenas, rather than the logic of an autonomous international struggle. As such, the behaviour of the various players finds its rationale in the dispositions developed in the national fields.

In adopting this conceptualisation, I draw upon Bourdieu’s works on the global circulation of ideas (Bourdieu, 1999; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999). In these writings, in which the internationalisation of intellectual life and international cultural production are addressed, Bourdieu expresses a certain amount of scepticism about the possible existence of a truly ‘scientific internationalism’ (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 220), or, in other terms, about the emergence of a truly autonomous international field of culture. For the French sociologist, although cultural categories are discussed in the international arena, they are always produced by a specific social-historical context, the ‘field of production’, and then reinterpreted according to the different context of the ‘field of reception’ (ibid, p. 221). Therefore, as Bourdieu says, ‘the international struggle for domination […] and for the imposition of the dominant principle of domination […] finds its roots in the struggles within each national camp, in struggles where the dominant national definition and foreign definition are themselves involved’ (ibid, p. 227). In an article written with Loïc Wacquant (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999), Bourdieu explains this point in reference to American cultural hegemony. He illustrates how sociological categories and definitions, such as ‘race’ or ‘underclass’, which are discussed in universities and intellectual circles all over the world, are products of the dynamics of the American cultural
field. However, through a process of de-historicisation and generalisation, these categories have been exported to other national cultural fields, thus consolidating the ‘universalisation’ of American culture (ibid.). This process is supported by actors (‘importers’) in the fields of reception, which reproduce and adapt American cultural products ‘while levying in the process their “cut” of the attendant material or symbolic profits’ (ibid., p. 50). In other words, for Bourdieu, the international is conceptualised as an arena for struggle among different national fields, where at stake is the ‘universalisation of a particular vision of the world’ (ibid, p. 52, note 1), that is, the acceptance of a particular national doxa, discourse or scientific and political category as universally applicable, regardless of the different historical contexts. At the same time, this international struggle over ideas cannot be separated from the internal power struggle.

There are a few examples of this type of analysis in IR. For instance, in Dezalay and Garth’s study on the universalisation of practices of governance (‘rule of law’) in Latin America, the authors demonstrate how economic and judicial concepts mainly produced by US institutions, as well as an American conception of the state, have been absorbed and readapted by national elites according to their specific historical trajectories to strengthen their position within the domestic field while simultaneously importing the American model of governance (Dezalay and Garth, 2002). In doing so, the Latin American elites adopted what Dezalay and Garth call ‘international strategies’, namely ‘the ways that national actors seek to use foreign capital, such as resources, degrees, contacts, legitimacy, and expertises […] to build their power at home’ (ibid, p. 7). Another example can be found in the studies on the impact of the complex relations between the Turkish state and private actors on Turkish foreign policy. In this case, the international dimension emerges as an arena of ‘contestation and negotiation between groups competing to promote their own agendas while claiming the monopoly of the legitimate representation of Turkey beyond its borders’ (Angey-Sentuc and Molho, 2015, p. 9). This international contestation cannot be separated from the promotion of the interests of these private actors in Turkish politics, thus underscoring the relevance of the national fields in determining the international positions of different agents (Ibid, p.10 Benhaim, 2015; Özdemirkıran, 2015).

As I demonstrate in this work, we can also see similar dynamics in the production of political and foreign policy discourses. For example, in promoting political reforms that would have weakened the position of the military, the most powerful Kemalist agent in the political field, the AKP exploited American and European support for a process of democratisation to discredit those who opposed their proposed packages of political reforms. As Ibrahim Kalin
(who became Erdoğan’s spokesperson in 2014) explains, as values like ‘representative democracy, transparency, rule of law, human rights and free-market economy […] open up more space for a free market of ideas, the old Turkish secularism feels cornered and disenfranchised’ (Kalin, 2009, p. 93). Eventually, the discourse around democratisation, readapted in line with the AKP’s position in the political field as representative of the social-conservative segments of Turkish society, was internalised in the party’s habitus and reproduced in the Middle East political arena. In doing so, especially during the Arab Spring, the AKP had much to gain in terms of accumulating political capital at home. As Dezalay and Garth highlight, competing factions within the field of production tend to utilise the fields of reception ‘as laboratories to demonstrate the relevance of models, whether religious, ideological, or reformist, that they seek to promote in their home societies’ (Dezalay and Garth, 2011, p. 279). Thus, the success of this strategy of internationalisation may lead to a return in terms of political capital at home. In this sense, the early electoral success of the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated parties in the Arab Spring over secularist political forces enhanced the prestige of the AKP’s religious-democratic political discourse around its secularist and Kemalist opponents.

Powerful agents in a political field situated in a powerful state do not just export specific models, approaches or products ‘but also their internal fights and the strategies used to fight those fights’ (Dezalay and Garth, 2002, p. 6). In this way, they are able not only to influence the power struggle in the other fields but also to shape the very structure of those fields (Nexon and Neumann, 2018). This dynamic, which McCourt (2021) calls the ‘hegemonic field effect’, is obtained through the possession by a certain actor of a plurality of capitals (political but also due to the belonging to a wealthy state, economic and military) as well as by a series of ‘interpersonal and inter-organisational relationships’ between elites in different national fields (Nexon and Neumann, 2018, p. 675). These relationships generate ‘jointly produced capital’ that create ‘interdependencies between “stronger” and “weaker” powers’ (ibid.). An example of this process is provided by McCourt’s analysis of the creation of the Schuman Plan in 1950. He illustrates how the Plan was a product of an alignment between the hegemonic American and the weaker French political fields, which McCourt defines as ‘structural homology’, which ended up empowering centrist and pro-European positions in the latter (McCourt, 2021). An important turning point of this process was the implementation of the Marshall Plan. Its implementation allowed the American political elite (at the time led by centrist and internationalist personalities such as George Marshall himself or Dean Acheson) to send
officials to Paris to supervise the use of funds. From this position, the Americans were able to support the policies of the French centrist government at the expense of both the leftist and Gaullist opposition, thus shaping the struggle in the French political field (ibid.).

In conclusion, the international is not conceived as a field per se but as a space comprising different national fields in which ideas, approaches and models are created in specific national contexts and then promoted and circulated. In a certain sense, this is similar to Bourdieu’s concept of field of power, where the recognition of the value of the various national capitals is at stake. However, contrary to what Bigo has written regarding the field of international security, in the case of the circulation of political ideas, the nature of the international struggle cannot be separated either by the promotion of national models or by nationally situated political struggles. In this sense, political actors act as ‘double agents’ (compare Dezalay and Garth, 2011), in that their practices in the international arena, including foreign policy discourses, are constructed in a way to accrue benefits in their national field. In other words, they play a ‘double game’ (compare Dezalay and Garth, 2002, 2011). The direction of the circulation of the political ideas, and thus the rules of the double game, depends on the hierarchy in the international system, which is the hierarchy among the different national fields. Ultimately, the success of the American cultural and political products is not due to their alleged “superior” capacity in addressing cultural and political problems worldwide but rather to the position of the American field of power in this hierarchy. For this reason, this Bourdieusian analysis is particularly suitable in addressing American hegemony, as the above-mentioned works of Bourdieu (1999), Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999), McCourt (2021), and others demonstrate. However, in this work I demonstrate how a similar framework can work also in cases of “hegemonic competitions”, as in the situation of the “battle of the models” between Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. This will be illustrated in detail in the following section.
1.3 Conceptualising the struggles for change and continuity in a field-theoretic approach: The doxic struggle for the Arab Spring

As illustrated above, the hegemonic competition between Turkish, Iranian and Saudi actors is played out within a sort of international political space in which the most powerful political fields try to shape the weaker ones by imposing their form of political capital as the only valid power currency. In other words, the stake of the competition is the imposition of a particular principle of vision and division of the political order as the only legitimate one in the Middle East. However, this competition was made possible primarily by the occurrence of the region-wide uprisings. Indeed, it is the Arab Spring that paved the way for a redefinition of principles of governance as well as of the relationship between politics and religion. In other words, the Arab Spring, by challenging the “rules of the game”, has created the necessary conditions for the outbreak of this hegemonic competition. In this competition, the discourses deployed by the competitors did not simply aim to enhance their position within the pre-existing regional game. Rather, they aimed at defining the direction of the change in the game (or, in the case of the Saudis, to prevent this change). For this reason, in defining this regional power struggle, I use the term ‘doxic battle’, which refers to a period of uncertainty, often due to a sudden event, in which the doxa is questioned, thus opening the possibility for a fundamental change in the field itself (see Villumsen Berling, 2012). However, before discussing this concept, it is important to deal with the problem of theorising change in Bourdieu. Therefore, this section is divided in two subsections. In the first, I discuss the “problem of change” in Bourdieu’s field theory. Here, I also provide an example of dynamic of change: the hysteresis effect (which triggers a change in the habitus). Second, I discuss the notion of doxic battle.

1.3.1 Change through Bourdieu: The case of hysteresis

The possibility to theorise social and political change through Bourdieu has been subjected to a certain scepticism. This derives from Bourdieu’s model of social reproduction and the central role that the concept of habitus plays in it. As mentioned above, because it functions both as a structuring structure and as a structured structure, habitus does not just generate practices but is also defined by the field. Thus it tends to reproduce practices that automatically reflect the conformation of the social universe. This common formulation of the relation between field and habitus as perfectly circular seems not to leave space for social change, which can only be
thought as the result of a sudden external event (Sewell, 1992, p. 16), thus fostering ‘accusations’ of structural determinism against Bourdieu⁴. This leads some to argue that Bourdieu privileges stability and continuity at the expense of change (see DiMaggio, 1979, p. 1470; Duvall and Chowdhury, 2011, p. 349). In other words, Bourdieu’s theory suits the explanation of the persistence of hierarchies of power and domination rather than their subversion (see Bueger and Gadiger, 2015, p. 455).

On his part, Bourdieu rejects this criticism, arguing that habitus should be regarded as ‘an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies that structure’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 133). Therefore, if it is true that habitus, as a product of specific structural and historical conditions, tends to reproduce practices in harmony with these conditions (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 72–73, 95), it is also true that these conditions are subjected to transformation and change. As mentioned above, social action is not determined by the habitus alone but by the encounter between habitus and field. This relation is far from perfectly circular. The dynamics under which habitus and structure are in almost perfect alignment, thereby producing a perfect social reproduction, are only a ‘particular case of the possible’ that occurs when ‘the conditions of production of the habitus and the conditions of its functioning are identical and homotheric’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 63). However, it is also possible that the fluidity of the social environment can produce a misalignment between habitus and field. Bourdieu conceptualises this misalignment as ‘hysteresis’ of the habitus, (ibid, p. 62; see also Bourdieu, 1984, p.142) and argues that in this condition, substantive social changes can occur, depending on how gradually the structure evolves and how fast the habitus can adapt. In this case, since habitus ‘always addresses present situations in terms of past experiences’ (Swartz, 1997, p. 213), social agents will produce out-of-tune practices. To clarify this phenomenon, Bourdieu also refers to it as the ‘Don Quixote effect’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 109; see also Bourdieu, 1990, p. 62). The image of Don Quixote fighting windmills represents a clear example of an actor whose habitus corresponds to a past state of the social order and which perpetuates dispositions no longer appropriate. A situation of hysteresis can result in two different outcomes: an adaptation of the habitus or a rebellion.

A common example of hysteresis in Bourdieu’s oeuvre can be found in his work on the French educational system during the May 1968 crisis. In this study, Bourdieu argues that the rapid

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⁴ This “accusation” is widely discussed in Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, pp.132-137).
social transformation of the student and professorial populations created a disjuncture between expectations and opportunities in the higher education (Bourdieu, 1988; compare Fisher, 1990; Swartz, 1997, pp. 214–217). As a result, the traditional forms of cultural capital, once easily converted into career advancements, were devalued. In this ‘crisis of succession’ (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 143), the anachronistic and reactionary behaviours of certain professors can be explained by the position they occupied in the academic field, which is inscribed in the habitus.

In Bourdieu’s own words, these ‘classificatory schemata originating in the common perception of a former state of the educational system, such as the distinction between humanities and science students or between the grandes écoles and the universities, lead to representations of present reality that do not account for new realities’ (Bourdieu, 1996a, p. 219; see also Bourdieu, 1988). In IR, the hysteresis effect is the analytical key used by Vincent Pouliot to explain Russia–NATO relations after the Cold War. In his work, Pouliot argues that the end of the Cold War represents a great change in the field of international security, which sees NATO as the dominant actor, with a consistent possession of the new relevant forms of capital. Despite this, according to Pouliot, Russia still exhibits practices in line with an age-old Great Power habitus. These practices, such as veiled threats or counterbalancing, are not in line with the lower position occupied by Moscow in the post-Cold War international security field, and therefore they were rejected by the West as out of place or not credible (Pouliot, 2010; Neumann and Pouliot, 2011, pp. 132–135).

The dynamics that lead to a hysteresis have been the object of criticism among some practice theorists, especially from those belonging to the so-called “pragmatic school”. In particular, these authors criticise the possibility to interpret the social environment in an unambiguous and objective manner due to the fluidity and inherent instability of the society (see de Certeau, 1988; Latour, 2005; Bauman, 2007; Boltanski, 2011; compare Bénatouïl, 1999; and Leander, 2011). Consequently, it is not possible to assess whether an agent is not rightly interpreting the structure. Similarly, Duvall and Chowdhury argue that an unequivocal and straightforward interpretation of the social reality, which they contend it is supported by Bourdieu, is neither theoretically nor empirically viable, since agents ‘can multiply interpret seemingly straightforward signals’ in different ways (Duvall and Chowdhury, 2011, p. 345). Following this line of reasoning, Schindler and Willie criticise the theoretical explanation in Pouliot’s work and argue that the instability of NATO–Russia relations is due to the presence of different interpretations of the meaning of past events, namely the end of the Cold War (Schindler and Willie, 2015).
In this thesis, the debate between Bourdieu’s critical sociology and the pragmatists is not discussed, since this would be beyond the purpose of the research (on this debate, see Leander 2011). However, mentioning these criticisms is important to clarify an aspect in favour of both Bourdieu’s and Pouliot’s arguments. For Bourdieu, social reality is not objective, but it is socially constructed. The fact that it is perceived as natural and objective is due to a process of misrecognition, which prevents the agents from being aware of the relations of power behind the establishment of categories of classifying reality (for this reason, he calls his approach structural constructivism, a point that has been already explained in the methodology of this thesis). In other words, the making of social reality is the result of a continuous symbolic power struggle, which defines the “legitimate” principle of interpretation of the social world, the value of capital and, therefore, the position of every social agents and behaviour expected by them. In this point of view, ‘hysteresis, thus, is in the eye of the beholder [that is the holder of the symbolic capital] – not out there as an objective or god’s eye reality’ (Neumann and Pouliot, 2011, p. 114). Cases of hysteresis can become more frequent when the actor in question does act in an international space with multiple fields. In this case, a habitus constructed in a certain (nationally situated) context could be ill-adapted for comprehending dynamics and struggles that occur in other fields in the same international space. As I argue later, this form of hysteresis can be seen in the case of Iranian actors in the Arab Spring. In this situation, the attempt to export the anti-imperialist “Iranian model” into post-revolutionary Arab political fields was met with a cold reaction, since the Iranian actors failed to appreciate that the type of discourse they adopted, as well as the types political and religious capital that were relevant to the Iranian “rules of the political game”, were not recognised in these fields. In the end, this led to a change in the Iranian foreign policy approach, as we can see in Iran’s relatively calm reaction to the 2013 Egyptian coup.

1.3.2 Change in the structure: Doxic battle

Another element to consider while addressing the issue of change and continuity is the possibility that external developments (whether of social, cultural, international or mixed character) put the field under pressure, thus opening up the possibility for the rise of new positions in the field or even the establishment of a new doxa. This eventuality is particularly relevant when we analyse the political field. As mentioned above, the strategies of the actors in the political field are constructed to mobilise segments of society behind their political
message. Political actors thus obtain the accumulation of political capital through this form of recognition that other societal actors and groups grant. In “exchange” for this recognition, the political actor delivers a series of initiatives (in terms of discourses, policies or other legislative actions) that aim to empower its “supporters” in their own fields of struggle. This mechanism creates a homology between the political field and other fields (Bourdieu, 1991b, p. 169), especially with the economic field (compare ibid.) and the fields of cultural production, including the religious field (Bourdieu, 1991a). As a consequence, dominant groups in various fields create “trans-field alliances” with the scope of dominating the field of power, which allows for control over the “exchange rate” of the different forms of capital.

This dynamic explains the perpetuation of a principle of domination throughout the entire society. However, it also makes the political order vulnerable to changes in the economic, cultural and religious realms. Often these changes are gradual. This is the case of the rise of the AKP in Turkey. As I illustrate in the following chapter, the conditions for the political domination of Erdoğan’s party can be partially found in the changes in the economic field, where a new socially conservative provincial bourgeoisie was able to exploit the process of neo-liberalisation that started in the 1980s to challenge the position of the traditional secular urban upper class. To carry on this struggle in the economic field, this new social class needed a political programme able to guarantee a further economic liberalisation and a weakening of the state bureaucracy, which embodies the statist and secularising dispositions inherited during the construction of the Kemalist state. After the collapse of other political options (such as the Motherland Party or the Islamist Welfare Party), this group turned to the newly established AKP, which offered a political discourse in line with both their economic interests and culturally conservative values. In this way, a gradual shift in power relations in the economic field ended up empowering “weaker” and heterodox positions in the political one, thus paving the way for a transformation of the doxa of the political field.

The changes of the external conditions that allow for the perpetuation of a field’s doxa are often gradual, as in the case described above. However, there are also situations in which these developments occur suddenly. An example is the crisis of the fundamental assumptions of the European security field in the 1990s, in which, following the dissolution of the Soviet threat, the role of the military capital and thus the structure and the doxa of the field itself were seriously questioned (Villumsen Berling, 2012). The redefinition of the doxa in the field occurred through the strategic mobilisation of different forms of capital, which is a struggle among different actors for determining which of these can be converted in symbolic power.
Villumsen Berling defines these symbolic power struggles as ‘doxic battles’ (ibid, p. 455). In the case of European security, the end of the Cold War questioned the basic “realist” assumptions of the field, leading to the devaluation of the military capital and a contemporary revaluation of scientific capital, thereby enabling new actors to reframe the categories of classification of threat and security (ibid.). In the case of doxic battle, not all the actors have the possibility to (re)shape the changing field. Actors must have a certain amount of capital, especially symbolic capital, acquired from previous struggles, to successfully challenge the old order. Moreover, as Senn and Elhardt argue, ‘they also have to craft narratives that are appealing to relevant audiences’, that is, that are already established within the field (Senn and Elhardt, 2014, p. 321). In other words, ‘changing the doxa requires drawing from the doxa’ (ibid.).

The Arab Spring reflects a situation in which the fundamental assumptions of the field are put under discussion, thus opening the possibility of a doxic battle. The 2010–2011 uprisings led to the overthrow of four political regimes (in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen) and dealt a blow to a certain vision of political reality that was dominant throughout the Middle East since the Camp David agreement. Therefore, the Arab Spring opened up the possibility for a new paradigm of governance for the various national political fields in the Middle East political space. It is in this peculiar historical situation that the “battles of the models” took place as a sort of doxic battle among different principles of vision and division. These principles, even though “disguised” as universal (or, in this case, as applicable to the whole region), are the product of particular national experiences, namely those of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Actors in these national political fields have responded to the Arab Spring by mobilising the political capital acquired in their previous nationally situated struggles, thus trying to obtain recognition and converting their political capital into symbolic capital to be used to shape the post-revolutionary political fields. The capacity of these actors to succeed in reshaping the post-Arab Spring order, to create a hegemonic field effect, lay in the coincidence between the ‘conditions of possibility’ (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 25–26) in their national fields and in the fields of reception. This explained why the attempt was more or less successful for the Turkish AKP and for the Saudis, while it resulted in a hysteresis for the Iranian regime. This point is developed later in the thesis.
1.4 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have offered an overview of my Bourdieu-inspired theoretical framework. First, I presented the key concepts of Bourdieu’s field theory (field, habitus, doxa and capital) to pave the way for the introduction of the political field, the arena in which political professionals struggle over the accumulation of prestige and credit in the form of political capital. This struggle is fought by deploying principles of vision and division that aim to mobilise sectors of society behind certain imaginaries of political order. Second, I discussed the relationship between the national political field and the international dimension. Drawing from the literature, I argued that the Middle East can be conceptualised as an international political space, or a field of power, in which different principles of vision and division circulate among various national political fields. Finally, I argued that the stake of the competition over the definition of the Arab Spring does not concern only the conversion of national political capital into symbolic capital but also the definition of the doxa of the various national fields. The uprisings challenged the political doxa throughout the region. Facing this situation, Turkish, Iranian and Saudi actors entered into a doxic battle to impose their respective principles of vision as the only dominating one in the regional “market of political ideas”.

In this chapter, I also explained how the hegemonic struggle in the Middle East cannot be separated by the simultaneous national political struggles. Therefore, there is an element of duplicity in the construction of foreign policy discourses, in which external relations and the international competitions for prestige and symbolic capital are balanced by the necessities and constraints that derive from the actor’s position in the domestic political field. Drawing upon the research agenda on Bourdieu in world politics, I refer to this duplicity as a double game. This framework offers a new interesting perspective in line with the previous literature on regional power rivalries in the Middle East during the Arab Spring since it offers the tools to deconstruct the different discourses (or models), thereby unveiling the power structures behind their adoption in response to the outbreak of the uprisings. In the next chapter, I offer an overview of these structures by illustrating the historical trajectories of the Turkish, Iranian and Saudi actors in their respective national fields. In this way, we can gain an understanding of the conditions of constructing and reproducing the three models of governance before examining how they compete against each other in the battle to reshape the regional political order.
Chapter 2

Genesis and composition of the political field and the making of foreign policy behaviour

The symbolic struggle over the Arab Spring, or “the battle of models”, is influenced by the internal struggles within the various national fields. The aim of the domestic struggles is the imposition of a legitimate vision of the social and political order, which is mainly determined in the political arena. To pursue this aim, politicians and political parties construct principles of vision and division, which are discourses that can mobilise segments of the society and accumulate political capital, a form of prestige and credit given to a political actor once it is recognised as the legitimate political representative of certain social stances. This game is played in any political field, regardless of its secular-republican (Turkey), theocratic-republican (Iran) or monarchical (Saudi Arabia) nature. The models of governance and associated discourses that I have presented in the introduction are forms of externalisation, or universalisation, of the principles of vision adopted by the Turkish, Iranian and Saudi political actors in their respective national fields. Therefore, to grasp the nature of the competition between these three models, it is important to deconstruct these principles. In doing so, it is necessary to reconstruct the fields within which these principles are produced and reproduced. This is the aim of this chapter.

This chapter illustrates two aspects of the political fields of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. The first is the process of constructing the field, which determines the field’s doxa and, therefore, the nature of the political struggle. The dynamics of this process depend on the simultaneous construction of the field of power (which encompass the political field) and on the configuration of the social universe, as well as on the relations between political agents and social groups. Here, it is important to stress that, in addressing the relation between class struggle and political struggle, Bourdieu’s theory differs from historical sociological approaches. For Bourdieu, the logic of politics is not necessarily tied to the interests of social classes. On the contrary, as the political field becomes more specialised, its functioning and its
rules become autonomous. The second aspect is the composition of the field. Political discourses are not just tools for mobilising social groups, but they are also strategies for playing an exclusive, or ‘esoteric’, game (see Bourdieu, 1991b, p.183). Because this game takes place in a space of objective relations (i.e. the field), the discourses produced are relational. That is, they make sense only in relation to the positions that created them and in relation to other discourses issued by other positions (see Thompson, 1999, p. 27). For this reason, to examine political discourses associated with a certain principle of vision, it is crucial to understand the position from which they are issued. As explained above, foreign policy discourses are political discourses. As such, they are the product of the structure of the field and of the power relations within the field.

The chapter is divided in three sections, one for each case study. The first section deals with Turkey, starting with the historical, social and political conditions leading to the formation of the Turkish political field. I then analyse the historical trajectory of the AKP. In doing so, this section demonstrates how the “Turkish model discourse”, as well as foreign policy discourses, are connected to the principle of vision and division adopted by the party in its domestic political struggle. In this way, the concept of political field succeeds in revealing the complex power dynamics behind the adoption of a particular ideational construct in foreign policy. The second section addresses the Iranian case. After an analysis of the formation of the Iranian political field, it looks more carefully at the structure of the field and at how it has evolved in response to the changing power relations between the various factions. While Khomeini played an important role in the genesis of the field, as well as in the drawing of the boundaries of the political discourse, his message has been interpreted both in orthodox and heterodox ways. The “Islamic Awakening discourse” and the “Iranian model” represent a strategy of reproduction of the orthodox positions in the field, which accumulate political prestige through a discourse that combines political Islam and anti-imperialism. Finally, the third section analyses the “Saudi variant”. Here, the focus of the analysis concerns the relationship between the religious and political fields of Saudi Arabia. In this section, I argue that the main struggle in the Saudi field of power is the one between the holders of political capital and rising positions in the fields of cultural production. In this view, foreign policy and the defence of the authoritarian order through the regional political space are understood as strategies for preserving the boundaries of the political field and the symbolic dominance of the Saudi royal family. In conclusion, this chapter demonstrates the utility of a Bourdieusian approach by theoretically connecting general patterns of foreign policy discourses and practices to the various strategies.
of accumulation within the political field. This paves the way for the in-depth analysis of Middle East politics during the Arab Spring that unfolds in the rest of the thesis.

2.1 The “Turkish model” revisited: The roots of the religious-democratic principle of vision and division

2.1.1 The genesis of the political field in Turkey

The socio-historical conditions that have supported the genesis of the political field have influenced its logic and determined the issues that can be politicised and the type of capital that can be converted into political and symbolic capital. In this sense, the creation and practices of a political group are somehow tied to the social groups they claim to represent (although, as I have already explained and later illustrate, the logic of political practice is autonomous). In the initial stage, the relationship between political and social groups is also influenced by the charismatic action of a political agent. This action, which Bourdieu calls the ‘oracle effect’, ‘consists in giving voice to those in whose name one is authorized to speak’ (Bourdieu, 1991b, p.211) and entails a total identification of the person with the group, if not a ‘symbolic substitute’ of the group, ‘in the sense that everything he says is the truth and life’ of the group (ibid, p. 212). This process leads this “exceptional” individual to be recognised as representative of an entire political faction, which in turn claims to represent the instance of groups that occupy a homologous position in the social arena. If we speak of dominant groups and of action performed during a period of vacuum, we are faced with a situation in which the oracle de facto creates and imposes the doxa of the field. This is the case of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the nationalist victory against the Western powers in the Turkish War of Independence (1919–1923).

In their analysis of Turkish nationalism, Akdeniz and Göker (2011) already offer an accurate account of the construction of the political field of the Turkish Republic and of the establishment of Kemalism as the doxa in the field. They illustrate how the development of the Kemalist doxa is the result of both Atatürk’s personal political entrepreneurship and the rise of two social positions between the 19th and the early 20th century: nationalist intellectuals and junior military officers (ibid, p. 318–319). This analysis underlines the presence of a homology between the rising position in the cultural field and another rising position in the political one.
Indeed, it was the growing socio-political relevance of the military, due to the reforms aimed at modernising the army promoted by Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II and the political vacuum at the end of the Empire, which allowed the nationalist ideals promoted by the ethnic Turkish intellectuals to be translated into coherent political programmes (ibid.). This led to the rise of the Committee of Union and Progress (İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti) in the last years of the Empire and consequently facilitated the emergence of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and of his nationalist and secularist ideology, which, with the establishment of the Republic, became the official ideology of Turkey.

The rise of the Kemalist faction started with the War of Independence, when the whole nation relied on Kemal to carry on the military struggle against the occupation powers, thus allowing the Kemalists to amass a significant amount of political capital. This was later employed against other political groups. In turn, the imperial authority (already previously criticised by the nationalist intellectuals) was denounced for its collaboration with the occupied powers. While religious factions were won by deploying the discourse of jihad against the foreigners, the image of the victorious army gained consensus among the rural and urban working classes (ibid, p.320). At the end of the war, the Kemalist faction had both the monopoly of the political representation of the hegemonic nationalist social positions and the monopoly of the sources of political capital in the political field. Later, the Kemalists spent the political capital to abolish the caliphate in March 1924 and establish the Republic. In October 1927, Kemal laid out his vision for Turkey during a speech in front of the National Assembly (the famous Nutuk). The vision, known as Kemalism, was based on six principles (or arrows): republicanism, nationalism, populism, statism and laicism (see Dumont, 1984). During the period of one-party rule in Turkey (1923–1945), in which the Kemalist Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP) dominated the state, the nationalist–Kemalist–republican narrative cemented its hegemony through the conversion of the political capital into symbolic capital in the field of power. This allowed Kemalists to tighten their grip on the state and to impose their secularist and nationalist logic on the bureaucratic and economic fields.

A throughout analysis of Kemalism is clearly beyond the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, it is important to underline at the least three crucial aspects of the Kemalist vision of political order that have influenced the trajectory of the AKP. The first aspect consists in the social conditions of the emergence of Kemalism, and the role played by the military in it. Indeed, the historical conditions leading to the construction of the Kemalist order guaranteed a considerable reserve of political capital for the army. Therefore, the officers could gain access
to the political field thanks to the institution’s status as ‘the guardians of Kemalism’ (Brown, 1987, p. 237), which gave them the margin of manoeuvre to impose their political vision on the other agents (Akdeniz and Göker, 2011, p. 321). This imposition could also be realised through the removal of democratically elected governments. Indeed, throughout the Republican history, the Turkish army executed at least four coups (in 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997), which were followed by periods of repression (including the execution of the liberal-conservative Prime Minister Adnan Menderes and two of his ministries in 1961) and disbandment of political parties (mainly, but not exclusively, Islamist ones). Moreover, in order to preserve the Kemalist vision of political order, with its strict interpretation of secularism, the army and the state bureaucracy adopted different legislative and judiciary measures in order to limit the political action of religious parties. Second, the hegemonic position of the Kemalists led to the crystallisation of Kemalism, including its ethnic-style nationalism, as the doxa of the field (see Akdeniz and Göker, 2011). Thus, non-Turkish political identities, especially of the Kurds, from the boundaries of the political field. This exclusion has had significant consequences, such as state repression of Kurdish activists in the 80s, and the beginning of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK)’s guerrilla in the 1984.

These two aspects indicated the inability of the Kemalist political agents to mobilise both religious masses and ethnic minorities behind the political doxa, thus appealing just to bureaucrats and a secularised and pro-state bourgeoisie as their main clients in the other social fields. To compensate that, the military put the Turkish politics under “tutelage”. In other words, they “exploited” the limits of the Kemalist doxa in order to legitimise their position in the political field. This situation put into question the compatibility between Kemalist hegemony and democracy (see, for instance, Dagi, 2012), a sort of contradiction given the “borrowing” of Western political categories by the Kemalists. As I explain in the next section, the AKP exploited this by developing a strategy of accumulation of political capital aiming at mobilise not just the religious masses and the already mentioned rising bourgeoisie, but also a part of the Kurdish minority and liberal intellectuals.

The final aspect regards the limits that the Kemalist rules of the game imposed on foreign policy. After the establishment of the Republic, and throughout most of its contemporary history, Turkey ‘fully identified itself with the West’, while maintaining ‘a very low profile in her relations with the Muslim Middle East’ (Bozdağhoğlu, 2003, p. 4). The first part may be surprising since the Republic was established through a war against Western powers. Moreover, the Turkish War of Independence was seen with sympathy by the Soviet Union and,
under the presidency of Kemal, diplomatic ties with Moscow were established (see Olson, Ince and Ince, 1997, p. 227–228). However, the internal development both in the political field and in the international arena led to the adoption of a pro-West foreign policy discourse by the Kemalists’ positions in the field.

Already in the early Republican period, Kemal employed a strategy of exclusion towards communism. For instance, he stated that if communism ‘was being diffused in our country from internal and external sources and aiming at various goals, and unless necessary measures were taken, the peace and unity of the Turkish people would be put in jeopardy’ (quoted in Gökay, 1993, p. 223). This anti-communist orientation in the political field was further reinforced by the developments in the aftermath of the Second World War, in particular by the ‘demands’ presented by Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov regarding the ‘return’ of the Kars and Ardahan provinces and concessions on the Turkish straits. This aggressive posture was one of the catalysts for pursuing NATO membership, which was gained in 1952 (see Hoffman and Cemgil, 2016, p. 1286; see also Coş and Bilgin, 2010). Membership in the organisation led to the incorporation of pro-Western discourses into the habitus of the Turkish military and, by virtue of its position in the political field, in the political doxa. At the same time, the Kemalist principle of vision, by promoting an ethnic (Turkish) national identity (Akdeniz and Göker, 2011), and secularism excluded multi-ethnic (Kurdish) and Islamist discourses from the field. As a result, the space of manoeuvre of Turkish political agents in the Middle East was limited, since any approach to the region based on shared cultural and/or religious ties would have faced a setback in the domestic political field. It was only when the conditions of the Turkish social arena, and of the international, changed that it became possible for dominated political groups to challenge the Kemalist doxa.

2.1.2 The historical trajectory of the AKP

Since the foundation of the Republic and the creation of the Turkish field of power, Kemalism established itself as the doxa of the political field, thus imposing a nationalist and secularist logic to the political game. However, this configuration has been challenged by other positions in the field. The Kemalist doxa has faced two adverse visions of the political order, namely Kurdish nationalism and political Islam (Akdeniz and Göker, 2011, p. 321). The latter is particularly important here. In fact, most of the cadres and leaders of the AKP, including
Erdoğan himself, had their first political socialisation within political parties that occupied the “Islamist position”, namely those political formations linked to the religious organisation Millî Görüş (National Vision). In the early 2000s, Erdoğan, along with other prominent young politicians (such as Abdullah Gül and Bülent Arınç), left the movement to create the AKP, which was conceptualised as more in line with the secularist tenets of the political field, thus marking a shift from heresy (open challenge of the doxa) to heterodoxy (challenge within the doxa, eventually leading to a gradual change). Therefore, from 2002, the main struggle in the field has been one between the orthodox Kemalist position, which aimed at preserving a strict version of the Kemalist “rules of the game”, and a heterodox position represented by the AKP, which sought to expand the boundaries of the political discourse in the field. The Turkish model discourse emerged as a strategy of accumulation of political capital adopted by the latter. To understand this strategy, it is important to analyse the structure of the AKP’s habitus. Since the habitus is the product of the history of the relationship between the agent and the structure, it is important to take a look to the historical trajectory of the AKP, which started with “Islamist heresy”.

Prior to the foundation of the AKP, the Kemalist elite enacted different strategies to exclude the Islamist discourse from the field. For instance, in his most famous speech in 1927, the Nutuk, Atatürk included secularism as one of the six main principles of the Republic, while at the same time reinterpreting the history of Turkish people by downsizing the role of Islam and stressing the pre-Islamic past of the Turks (Morin and Lee, 2010). Moreover, throughout the Republican history, Kemalist positions framed the Islamic movement as ‘inherently and categorically opposed to their civilizing mission’ (Kasaba, 1997, p. 28). In this way, it was possible to label any reference to Islam in the political discourse as “reactionary”. This demonisation of religion in the political field was accompanied by the prohibition of traditional Ottoman social practices (like wearing the fez or the veil, both prohibited by Atatürk’s reforms), as well as by the active promotion of Western practices and ideas in every field of society. This does not mean that the Turkish political field was immune to any attempt to mobilise certain segments of society, such as the rural masses, through the deployment of religious themes in the political discourse. A notable example of this was the political experience of Adnan Menderes’ Democratic Party in the 1950s (see Pelt, 2008). However, as Akdeniz and Göker note, this political experience did not represent a rupture with the field’s

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5 Represented by the military establishment and by the Kemalist parties, such as the Republican People Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP).
doxa but rather an attempt to accumulate political capital by mobilising social classes that were dissatisfied with the statist economic policies of the CHP (Akdeniz and Göker, 2011, p. 321). As far as foreign policy is concerned, the dominant group framed discourses in a way to depict Turkish society as part of the Western world, while interactions with the Middle East were kept at a minimum, if not labelled as a threat to the raison d’être of Turkish national identity (Bozdağlıoğlu, 2003, p. 53).

Therefore, because of this configuration of the political field, the political action of the Islamic political movement was kept under control. However, the secularist logic within the field was weakened by two developments. First, the military itself in the 1980s deployed religious symbols to curb the influence of leftist-communist socio-political movements in politics and society (Çetinsaya, 1999, p. 374). This tendency, known as ‘Turkish-Islamic synthesis’, can be considered as an attempt by the military to redefine Islam according to Turkish nationalism.

Secondly, from the 1980s the political field experienced increasing external pressures. Neoliberal reforms began under the governments led by Turgut Özal in the 1980s, which weakened the secularist state’s bureaucracy while favouring the integration of large sections of the rural populations into the middle class and the subsequent rise of a new “provincial” bourgeoisie (Akdeniz and Göker, 2011, pp. 322–323; Hoffmann and Cemgil, 2016, pp. 1288–1289). These new social positions developed in synergy with religious networks active in the fields of culture and education, such as Hizmet (led by the US-based preacher Fethullah Gülen) or Millî Görüş. Throughout the 1980s and the early 1990s, Özal’s Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi, ANAP), was the main representative of these societal forces within the political field.

With Özal’s death in 1993 and the subsequent decline of the ANAP, the rising social positions that emerged in the 1980s liberalisation process turned their attention towards the Islamic movement, which in the 1990s had its political representation in the Welfare Party (Refaah Partisi, RP), led by Necmettin Erbakan.

The mobilisation of these segments of Turkish society allowed the RP to emerge as a considerable challenge to the Kemalist political order. The party garnered the most votes in both the 1994 municipal elections (which saw the election of a young Erdoğan as Mayor of Istanbul) and the 1995 general elections. Following these victories, the RP formed a coalition with the secular conservative True Path Party, and Erbakan became Prime Minister. This political development should have stabilised the party’s role at the centre of the political field. However, the army was able to isolate and delegitimise the RP. The generals successfully
framed the Erbakan government as a threat to the Republic, contesting both its overture towards Iran and the Middle East in foreign policy and the perceived latent “Islamisation” of society. During a trip to Washington, DC, in February 1997, General Çevik Bir warned that ‘Turkey today is faced with a radical Islamic threat. As the military, we have to speak out’ (quoted in Bozdağlıoğlu, 2003, p. 137). He also made clear that the military wanted Turkey ‘to be a modern country with values like those of any European country or the United States’ (quoted in Kinzer, 1997). In the same month, the military sent a memorandum to Erbakan, urging him to reverse his policies. The then-Prime Minister had no choice but to sign. This did not stop the campaign of delegitimisation led by the army, and the state bureaucracy finally forced Erbakan to resign; this eventually led to the ban of the RP by the constitutional court.

The failure of the RP (and of its immediate successor, the short-lived Virtue Party) to convert the significant changes in Turkey’s socio-economic fabric into political power was mainly due to the outdated political discourse used by the party. In other words, the habitus of the Islamic movement’s leadership was not in line with the core beliefs of the political field. Thus, the dominant coalition of the field could depict the RP’s ideas as a “threat to the Republic” and legitimised the de facto coup of 28 February. The party’s poor performance in the power struggle with the Kemalists led to the disaggregation of the Millî Görüş. Within the movement, a new generation of politicians led, among others, by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül, arose and challenged Erbakan’s leadership. In the end, the reformists decided to abandon the movement and formed a new party – the AKP. The newly founded party changed the political strategy. Although it continued to claim to represent the religious constituency by maintaining some references to Islam as an important element of the cultural identity of the Turkish nation, it also stressed its support for the core values of the Republic (Atacan, 2005). At the same time, the party’s neoliberal economic program attracted the emergent bourgeoisie (Coşar and Özman, 2004). Thus, the AKP initially presented itself as a liberal-conservative heterodox position in the political field, contrary to the traditional Islamist political parties, which carried on a principle of vision and division completely opposed to the Kemalist and secular political order. This difference is succinctly explained by Bahri Zengin, a member of the Islamist old guard:

[T]hey wanted to follow real politics, which meant that we must act according to political restrictions in Turkey. They said that the military, the media and the big industrialists determined the political structure of Turkey and we had to try to get their support. They
were right. These powers determine politics but our mission is not to follow them but to establish a new civilization. As you know the establishment put pressure on the opposition. What do they do? They ignore you, or they identify you as fanatical and try to obstruct your development, or they accuse you, or they even threaten you. What are you going to do? Are you going to follow your cause or are you going to subordinate yourself to them? They preferred the second and they used different arguments in order to justify their obedience (quoted in Atacan, 2005, p. 194).

However, the function of the AKP was not merely to guarantee the absorption of the Islamic challenge within the Kemalist rules of the game. Rather, after its first electoral victory in 2002, the AKP became the vehicle for a “doxic change” within the field. This change involved the weakening of the role of the military. The struggle with the Kemalist establishment also included strategies enacted in both the domestic field and in international political space. An example of this is the AKP’s successful monopolisation of the “democratisation discourse”. This was obtained by combining a pro-democracy rhetoric with the external pressures exercises on the political filed by the European Union’s integration process (which started in 1999 and was initially supported by the AKP). For instance, research conducted by Ece Özlem Atikcan and Kerem Öge stressed how the most employed argument in AKP members’ speeches during the 2010 referendum campaign, which marked the decline of the army as a political agent, was the enhancement of democracy6 (Atikcan and Öge, 2012). In this way, the AKP’s strategy aimed at challenging the boundaries of the political doxa by underlining the only element of Western political culture that questioned the dominant position of the military: democratisation. Therefore, the AKP’s discourse in the field evolved into a new principle of vision and division, which I call the “religious-democratic principle”. This was able to impose itself as the new dominant, although not hegemonic, discourse in the field, thus starting a process of transforming the field itself.

As part of this strategy for legitimation and restructuration of the field, the AKP tried to use the Kurdish issue to deepen its challenge to the Kemalist orthodoxy. Since the establishment of the Republic, the political field has always denied any ethnic identity other than the Turkish

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6 The reform package approved by the referendum not only included measures that strengthened social and civil rights but also provisions that affected the position of the army, for instance, the possibility that military officers who committed crimes against the state, including the perpetrators of the infamous 1980 coup, could be tried in civilian courts. The passage of the referendum symbolised the decline of the social and political prestige of the Turkish army, which was already compromised by a series of judiciary scandals that had occurred a few years earlier.
one, to the point that the military refers to Kurds as ‘Mountain Turks’ (*Dağ Türkleri*) (Sagnic, 2010). Thus, Kurdish nationalist discourse has always been one of the greatest challenges to Kemalist orthodox positions in the field. In this regard, it is important to examine the speech that Erdoğan delivered in Diyarbakır in August 2005. Here, the then-Prime Minister recognised the existence of a ‘Kurdish problem’ and pledged to resolve it ‘with more democracy, more civil rights and more prosperity’ (quoted in Al Jazeera, 2005). This was accompanied by another public statement made by Erdoğan in the Great Assembly in November 2005, in which he rejected ‘nationalism based on ethnic origins’ and promoted a reconciliation under the aegis of a multi-ethnic Turkish citizenship (Taşkin, 2008, p. 62). This supranational identity, which can be described as *Türkiyelilik* (which literally means “from Turkey”) (ibid.; Akdeniz and Göker, 2011, p. 330), relies on the evocation of the common Islamic roots of the Turkish and Kurdish people as one of the tools to mobilise the most religious (i.e. Sunni) segments of the Kurdish population (see Günay and Yörük, 2019).

The intersection of the religious and Kurdish challenges was certainly not a novel development in the Turkish political field. Already at the beginning of the Republic, Kurdish tribal leaders raised the Islamic banner in opposition to Turkish nationalism in a series of uprisings between the 1920s and 1930s, while in the 1980s, Özal tried to assimilate the separate Kurdish identity within a (neo-)Ottoman multi-ethnic model (Ataman, 2002). Moreover, in the 1990s, Erbakan’s *Millî Görüş* was able to attract considerable support among the Kurdish population by using Islam as a ‘historical common denominator’ (Taşkin, 2008, p. 62). In this sense, the strategies carried out by Erdoğan reflect an element of continuity and coherence with other positions in the political field. This should not be a surprise, since the connection between the AKP and Erbakan’s RP and Özal’s ANAP is embodied in the party’s membership. In other words, since members, and leaders, of the AKP used to be active in these political groups, the past experiences of the RP and the ANAP has been internalised in the party’s habitus. Therefore, certain strategies, such as the conversion of Kurds’ religiosity into political capital for the party, are somehow “inherited” by principles of vision and division that already existed in the history of the political field. These dynamics were intertwined by new developments, such as the increase of the AKP’s prestige due to the advancement in the process of EU integration, which introduced in the Turkish political field the issue of minority rights.

The issue of an autonomous Kurdish identity is an object of struggle at the transnational level, touching different national fields (Syrian, Iranian, Iraqi, etc.). Thus, it is a perfect example of
how discourses that have emerged in the political field are externalised. In this case, the Kemalist principle of vision and division, which denies the existence (or the legitimacy) of a Kurdish political identity within Turkey, produced foreign policy discourses that denied the legitimacy of a Kurdish political identity in the Middle East. This is reflected in the approach followed by the Kemalist positions towards the de facto autonomous Kurdish entity that emerged in Northern Iraq in the early 1990s. At first, relations with the “new” neighbour were a cause of dispute between the then-President Özal and the military establishment. Reflecting a more inclusive vision of political order, in 1991, Özal invited representatives of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan to Ankara (Lundgren, 2007, p. 85). The move, which granted a form of recognition of Kurdish Iraqi political parties as legitimate representatives of the area, was met with criticism from the military. Finally, the pressure of the Kemalist establishment led the government to ‘clarify’ the move with Baghdad by stating that it was interacting with ‘leaders of two Iraqi political parties’ and not with ‘representatives of the Kurdish region’ (ibid, p. 86). This choice of words reflected a conversion of the orthodox vision of the political order – according to which any autonomous political representation of the Kurds is illegitimate – into foreign policy discourses.

However, with the rise of the AKP’s principle of vision and division in the political field, the pace of relations with Erbil changed dramatically. After the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime in Baghdad by the US, and the following creation (this time de jure) of an autonomous region in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Erdoğan government recognised the newly established Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and sought to establish strong relations with the new neighbour. For instance, in November 2013, during a state visit of KRG President Masood Barzani in Diyarbakır, Erdoğan addressed his guest as ‘The President of the Kurdistan Regional Government’ and referred to the region in Northern Iraq as ‘Kurdistan’ (Necef, 2013, p. 3). In the same event, Erdoğan also affirmed that ‘[r]ejection, denial, and assimilation have ended with our government’ (Erdoğan, 2013, as quoted in Saraçoğlu and Demirkol, 2015, p. 309). In the same year, the AKP government took a bold step towards resolving the conflict with the PKK with the beginning of the so-called Solution Process (Çözüm Süreci). The negotiations officially started in March, when the PKK’s imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan, declared the ceasefire during his message for the Nowruz festivities. This intersection between the integrationist and democratic strategy towards the Kurds at home and the amicable relationships with the Iraqi Kurds shows how power struggles over the domestic political field affect foreign policy.
The rupture with the Kemalist establishment is also evident in foreign policy discourses associated with the West and the Middle East. This discourse emerged before Ahmet Davutoğlu, architect of the AKP’s foreign policy, published his famous 2001 book *Stratejik Derinlik* (‘Strategic Depth’, Davutoğlu, 2001). Throughout his academic and political career, Davutoğlu questioned both the effectiveness and the legitimacy of Kemalist foreign policy. For instance, in certain occasions, he described Turkey’s past role in world affairs as ‘peripheral’ (Davutoğlu, 2008, p. 79). At the same time, he advocated a more proactive policy by presenting it as a “return to normality” or as the end of an unnatural alienation of the Turkish nation from historically and culturally related geographical spaces ((Davutoğlu, 1994, 2001a, 2001b, 2008). In this way, Davutoğlu, and consequently the AKP and Erdoğan, (re)discovered religious affiliation as a form of cultural and symbolic capital to be deployed in the Middle East. Islam and the “pro-democracy discourse” were the core aspects of the religious-democratic principle of vision of division, which, through the label of the “Turkish model” applied by agents of the field of cultural reproduction (scholars and analysts) was ready to be exported once the opportunity arose.

In this first section, I have offered a field-theoretical analysis of the genesis of the AKP’s foreign policy. Drawing from Bourdieu, I have illustrated the genesis of the Turkish political field and the rise of Kemalism as the field doxa from the establishment of the Republic until the early 2000s, as well as the development of the pro-Western discourses within the field itself. This offers an understanding of the political conditions that constrain the political actions of the AKP. This was followed by an analysis of the historical trajectory of the party within the Turkish political field, which started at the margins, when its founding members were part of the reformist wing of the Islamic political movement, and ended at the centre of the field as the political force behind the restructuring of the universe of political discourses. This process explains the creation of the AKP’s habitus and thus the logic behind the production of the foreign policy discourse that is usually referred to as the “Turkish model”. Turkish foreign policy during the Arab Spring is partially explained through the logic of the internal political struggle between the AKP and other positions in the field. However, to have a complete picture, it is necessary to analyse the relationship between this internal logic and regional politics, a task that is carried out in the other chapters of the thesis.
2.2. Assessing the political, religious and symbolic roots of the Iranian foreign policy discourse: The political field of the Islamic Republic and the anti-imperialist principle

2.2.1 Khomeini and the genesis of the Iranian political field

As far as the Islamic Republic of Iran is concerned, the genesis of the political field was influenced by the events of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, when a political movement led by Muslim clerics overthrew the monarchical regime of the Shah. The revolution demonstrably created a connection between the political and religious field. This relationship is embodied by the charismatic personality of Khomeini, who in a certain sense exemplified what Bourdieu calls a ‘prophet’, a bearer of a ‘charismatic power’, who can inspire socio-political transformations (Bourdieu, 1991a, p. 33–38). These ‘symbolic revolutions’, which Bourdieu applies not just to the religious field but also to other fields of cultural production, are able to mobilise different actors from different fields in the direction of a total rupture of the social order. This is the case of Khomeini, whose “charismatic action” during the 1979 Revolution led to a synchronisation of different positions in different social fields, which eventually favoured the emergence of homologous strategies of subversion against the monarchical regime. This process had been multifaceted, involving struggles in religious, economic and political fields as well as in the intersection(s) between them. Illustrating the whole process is beyond the scope of my work. Rather, I offer an overview of the creation of the Iranian political field and of the relation with the religious field in the field of power, thus providing an explanation of how these two processes led to the production of anti-imperialist and revolutionary foreign policy discourses.

The history of relations between religion, politics and anti-imperialism in Iran is complex. Traditionally, the role of the Shia’s clergy in Iranian society was limited within the religious sphere (the emission of *fatwa*) and, in certain cases, to the judiciary (acting as a judge in legal disputes using Islamic law) (Safshekan and Sabeti, 2017, p.16). While it tended to stay out from politics, this quietest “paradigm” of politics justifies itself in the belief that after the Great Occultation no political system was legitimate, and participation was thus discouraged (see

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7 Another example of ‘prophet’ is offered by Bourdieu’s work on Manet and the artistic field (Fowler, 2020, pp. 450–453).
8 In the Shia tradition, the Great Occultation refers to a period that started in 329 AH/941 CE, during which the 12th Imam, the last leader of the Shia community, hid away to await the end of times.
Nevertheless, throughout modern Iranian history, there have been episodes that have seen a direct intervention of religious scholars in political affairs. The first well-known case was the 1890 Tobacco Revolt, which was supported by a *fatwa* emanated by Ayatollah Mirza Shirazi. However, during the Constitutional Revolution from 1905 to 1911, prominent clerics could be found in both factions. On the one hand, Ayatollah Mohammad Hossein Naeni supported the revolution, affirming that a constitutional government with the participation of the clergy in the legislative was preferable to a tyrannical system (ibid). On the other hand, Ayatollah Fazlollah Noori, alarmed by the dominance of nationalist and ‘Westernised’ intellectuals in the constitutional camp, believed the opposite and supported absolute monarchy (ibid, pp. 16–17; see also Hunter, 2014, pp. 41–44), eventually paying for his stance with his life at the hand of the constitutionalists. Another case was the Islamist movement *Fedayeen el-Islam* (FEI), founded in 1946 by Navab Safavi and still active today despite the liquidation of its original leadership in the mid-1950s. As opponent of the Shah regime (in 1955, the FEI tried to assassinate the Shah’s then-Prime Minister Hossein Ala), and with a social base consisting of small merchants and a small pious bourgeoisie (the *bazaaris*), the FEI was the most important faction in the pre-Khomeini Islamist opposition against the Shah (Hunter, 2014, pp. 87–88).

Despite these episodes, during the reign of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi from 1941 to 1979, the dominant practices surrounding politics in the religious field consisted of the traditional quietism, while Khomeini’s political activism and politico-religious principle of the Guardianship of the Jurist (first elaborated in the early 1970s) remained at the margin of the field. Moreover, as the clergy (including the influential Ayatollah Kashani) and its allies in the economic field, the traditionalist mercantilist class of the *bazaaris* and the rural landlords, used to be aligned with the Shah against secular and democratic forces. These social groups were among the strongest supporters of the Mohammed Reza during the 1953 coup against the Mossadegh government. This alliance allowed the Shah to purge the secular forces (especially the left) from the political and other social fields. However, this ‘post-coup compromise’ (Matin, 2013, p. 136) ended with the White Revolution of 1963, which introduced a series of reforms, including the land reform, women’s suffrage and the eligibility of non-Muslims in municipal elections, which threatened the social status of the clergy. These reforms were supposed to outmanoeuvre the secular opposition, especially the communist Tudeh Party (Ansari, 2003, p. 147; Matin, 2013, p. 109). However, they ended up alienating segments of the society, such as the landlords, as well as factions within the clergy (Matin, 2013, pp.109–110).
The opposition to the White Revolution and to the country’s Western-style modernisation promoted by the Shah paved the way for more politically active positions in the religious field. In this occasion, certain religious officials began to express strong criticism against the Shah, although they did not explicitly call for the overthrow of the monarchy. One of these personalities was Ruhollah Khomeini, who held several sermons criticising the Shah. Notably, the sermons touched upon a series of issues, ranging from some aspects of the White Revolution to the Shah-led Westernisation of the country, including ‘subservience’ to the US and relations with Israel (ibid, p. 109; see also Abrahamian, 1982, p. 425). Eventually, Khomeini was arrested and forced into exile. However, this early opposition granted him a great degree of prestige among clerical circles, which was translated into the accumulation of religious capital. At the same time, as Matin (2013, pp. 110–112) explains, the White Revolution (the land reforms) succeeded in outmanoeuvring the secular opposition, (temporarily) defeating the religious dissent and eliminating the landlords as a political force; the reforms coincided with an increased centralisation of political power in the hands of the Shah and with the marginalisation of the Parliament. However, this strategy failed to create a new peasantry loyal to the regime. Instead, the land reforms further impoverished a huge segment of the rural population, thus fostering a process of rural–urban migration. This new “rural proletariat” was absorbed by the Bazaar (ibid, p. 112), thus cementing the position of the Bazaar’s small bourgeoisie in the economic field. This strengthening of the Bazaar was unintended, since the regime continued to favour industrial capital, including from foreign groups (especially on banking and credit policies). Nonetheless, the economic resources acquired by the bazaari merchant class flowed into the coffers of the Khomeini-led religious opposition (ibid, p.113).

In addition to these developments in the economic field, there were also changes in the composition of the intellectual field, in which the dominant positions represented by secular positions, whether nationalist or Marxist, were “threatened” by the rise of new positions embodied by religious scholars such as Motahhari, Tabatabei, Musa Sadr (Lebanese founder of the Amal party), Beheshti and Khosroshani (Hunter, 2014, p. 95 footnote 26). Along these young clerics, there was the layperson Ali Shariati, who, with his capacity to combine the leftist revolutionary language with Shia theological discourse, was considered the great ‘ideological architect’ of the Islamic revolution (see Matin, 2013, pp.130–136). These developments led to an appreciation of religious capital in the Iranian social universe. The holders of this form of capital were able to mobilise different positions in the economic and intellectual field and reach
the poorest segments of Iranian society. Thus, the holders of this capital, including Khomeini, were able to challenge the holders of political capital (the Shah) in the field of power. Nevertheless, Khomeini’s faction, even in the wake of and during the Revolution, had to face strong opposition from more traditionalist positions in the religious field, such as that of Ayatollah Shariatmandari, who supported clergy’s quietism and non-interference in politics (Kadivar, 2017, p. 6). At the same time, the imposition of the Guardianship of the Jurist as the doxa of the political field had to confront the presence of nationalist-secularist (the National Front) and leftist (the Tudeh or the Fedayeen al-Kalq) groups in the revolutionary camp, as well as of moderate Islamists (Mehidi Bazargan and Bani Sadr). The success of Khomeini in the aftermath of the Revolution depended on both his charisma and on the deployment of anti-imperialist discourses.

As mentioned above, for Bourdieu, charisma represents a sort a political action performed in a moment of crisis. He further explains charisma as ‘the prophetic action of giving meaning, which founds and legitimates itself […] by the confirmation that its own success confers on the language of the crisis and on the initial accumulation of the power of mobilisation which its success has brought about’ (Bourdieu, 1991b, p. 194). In the case of Iran, the initial power of mobilisation, that is, the initial accumulation of symbolic power, in the hands of Khomeini started with his opposition to the Shah during the White Revolution. During the revolt, as admitted by a newspaper that at the time was linked to the secular opposition, ‘it was the religious leaders and not the political parties that inspired and encouraged the masses’ (quoted in Abrahamian, 1982, p. 461). Later, Khomeini was careful to frame his language in a way to create a broad alliance of social forces that included clergy and the bazaar, as well as intellectuals, the urban poor and political actors varying from moderate Islamists of the Freedom Movement of Iran and secular groups like the National Front to guerrillas groups (ibid, p. 479). In virtue of his position as the “spiritual leader” of the revolutionary movement, Khomeini had the recognition necessary to exercise the (symbolic) power of “giving meaning” described by Bourdieu. An example of this can be found a few days after his triumphal return to Tehran in February 1979, when, in defiance of the Shah-designated government of Shapur Bakhtiar, he nominated Mehidi Bazargan as new head of the executive. In doing so, Khomeini declared:

*He whom I have designated is to be made obeisance to; the nation must obey him. This government is no ordinary one; it is a canonical government. Opposition to this government is opposition to the canon laws and is tantamount to rebellion against religion.*
Rebellion against this government is rebellion against God and rebellion against God is atheism (Khomeini, 1979a, p.54).

Therefore, the legitimacy of the Bazargan government derived exclusively from the fact that it was designated by Khomeini. This act de facto created the government, and, subsequently, the whole institutional structure of the future Islamic Republic. The religious significance conferred to the government revealed the dominant position occupied by Khomeini in both the political and religious fields as well as in the emerging field of power. From this position, Khomeini was able to shape the Iranian post-revolutionary social universe and to purge the religious and political fields of agents who opposed the principle of the Guardianship of the Jurist. In the first case, the aim was partially achieved through both a crackdown of the most critical clerics (such as Shariatmandari) and co-opting the socially conservative ones (such as Ayatollah Golpayegani) (Kadivar, 2017, pp. 6–7).

In the case of the political rivals, the purge of moderate, secular and leftist groups and the following instauration of the Guardianship of the Jurist as the doxa of the new political field was partially made possible by the strengthening of the anti-imperialist and anti-American credentials of Khomeini and his followers. The history of the animosity of Iranians towards the US (which will neither be treated in this chapter nor in the thesis) dated back to the 1953 coup against the nationalist Prime Minister Mossadegh, which was organised by the CIA, and was exacerbated by the political support that Washington granted to the Shah since then. ‘Resistance against the United States thus became an important element in the [R]evolution’ (Warnaar, 2013, p. 69), making anti-American discourses a means for accumulating political capital. For a certain period, the left held the monopoly over the production of these discourses. Moreover, in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Monarchy, leftist groups (the Fedayeen al-Kalq, the Mujahedeen al-Kalq and others) had control of university campuses and labour unions. It is in this context that the takeover of the US Embassy in November 1979 took place. As Tabaar notes, Khomeini’s decision to support the move was taken in consideration of the threat coming from the left, which led Islamists to strategically adopt ‘the Left’s anti-imperialist language and eventually occupied the US embassy to establish their anti-American credibility’ (Tabaar, 2017, p.665). The move not only enhanced Khomeini’s position in relation to the left but also forced Bazargan, who tried to prevent the instauration of a theocratic regime, to resign and led to the purge of the secular-nationalists who favoured good relations with the West from the political system.
Eventually, the strategic employment of anti-American discourses led to their incorporation into the Iranian Islamists’ habitus and, considering the position of Khomeini as the great leader of the Revolution, to their absorption in the universe of official political discourses in the Islamic Republic’s political field. In a certain sense, in the field, “compliance” with this anti-imperialist norm is as important as compliance with Islamic law. When asked about the possibility of the existence of multiple parties and factions in an Islamic system, Khomeini replied:

[So long as there are differences and discussions within the confinement of the above-mentioned issues, there is no threat for the revolution. If the difference were on the principles and foundations, it would lead to the slackening of the system. If there is difference among the individuals and parties affiliated to the revolution, it is purely political although an ideological colour is given to it. […] However, both (parties) totally pay attention to the fact that assuming stances should be such that while preserving the principles of Islam throughout history, they should be the keepers of their and the people’s revolutionary wrath and rancour against the Western capitalism, on top of which is the world-devouring American and the international communism and socialism, on top of which is the aggressor Soviet Union. Both currents should undertake utmost efforts lest there should not be even an iota deviation from the policy of – Neither East nor West but the Islamic Republic. If there is, they should be corrected by means of Islamic justice (Khomeini, 1988, pp.171–172, bold mine).

This passage is illuminating, as it explains the functioning of a political field that works until all the agents (‘individuals and parties’) compete according to the rules of the game, that is, until their discourses and political programmes are in line with the doxa (‘principles and foundations’) of the field. More importantly, keeping the ‘revolutionary wrath and rancour’ against the US is a central aspect of the doxa. This ‘wrath’ is extended also to Israel as well as to the regimes aligned with American’s interests, including the Saudis, who are described as ‘the hypocritical rulers of Saudi Arabia and traitors to the sanctity of the two holy cities’, as well as ‘agents’ of American and Israel (Khomeini, 1987, p.330). However, it also includes others ‘who are allies of the criminal Israel and who commit any treason against their own people to serve America and Israel’, such as ‘Husayn of Jordan, this vulgar professional criminal, Hasan of Morocco and Husni Mubarak of Egypt’ (Khomeini, 1983, pp. 403–404). The absorption of these discourses in the political doxa, through the action of the charismatic founder of the Islamic Republic, led to the production of anti-Imperialist and revolutionary
foreign policy practices in the Iranian political field, thus making them a distinctive aspect of the Iranian regional discourse and of the “Iranian model”.

2.2.2 The structure of the Iranian political field

Ruhollah Khomeini died in 1989 after a tenure of ten years as the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, which were characterised by the devastating eight-year war against Iraq. At that time, his political discourse, which merged Islam and anti-imperialism, was already crystallised as the doxa of the political field, and its hegemony has been assured by the presence of a series of institutions that guaranteed that all the political agents follow the “rules of the game”. The Islamic Republic of Iran has a dual political system, where elected institutions like the Presidency and the Parliament (*Majlis*) (as well as the Assembly of Experts, which appoints the Supreme Leader) coexist with others whose members are appointed. Among these are the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council (12 members, six appointed by the Supreme Leader and six by the judiciary). The latter has the function to approve (or veto) candidates, as well as to veto bills passed by the democratically elected *Majlis*. Importantly, these unelected institutions were not neutral to the political struggle. It is well-known that the Guardian Council has played an important role in curbing the agenda of reformist administrations as well as in disqualifying reformist candidates in various elections. On his part, the Supreme Leader emerged from the post-Khomeini era as the higher position in the hierarchy of the political field, to the point that a well-known reformist, Mostafa Tajzadeh, once said that the three branches of the government (executive, legislative and judiciary) were mere divisions of the Supreme Leader’s office (Hunter, 2014, p. 220).

The rise of the Supreme Leader after Khomeini’s death is also a central point in understanding the power relations both within the political field and between the political field and other social microcosms in the field of power. Initially, the constitution of Iran asserted that only a cleric with the rank *marja’* (source of emulation, the highest rank in the Shia clerical hierarchy) could succeed Khomeini as Supreme Leader. However, in a private letter sent to the chairman of the Expediency Council in April 1989, Khomeini assessed that he never believed that being a *marja’* was necessary (Khomeini, 1989, p. 371). Behind this move was the fact that after the dismissal of the previously appointed successor, Ayatollah Ali Montazeri (who was forced to step down after strongly criticising Khomeini for the repression of dissents), there was no personality with both Khomeini’s religious authority and political thought (Gieling, 1997, pp.
Therefore, the issue of succession was a crucial point for the preservation of the orthodoxy of the political field. Ali Khamenei, who succeeded Khomeini, was just a middle-rank cleric and before his appointment was not even called Ayatollah (Kadivar, 2017, p. 7). However, after Khomeini’s death in June 1989, then Speaker of the Parliament Akbar Rafsanjani exploited the discursive space left by Khomeini’s letter to put forth the idea that political and revolutionary credentials were more important than religious ones to be qualified for the position of Supreme Leader (Hunter, 2014, p. 141). Subsequently, a constitutional amendment removing the requirement of being a marja’ was approved, thus paving the way to the appointment of Khamenei, who was supported by Rafsanjani.

Nevertheless, the lack of the new Supreme Leader’s religious credentials remained a source of insecurity for the new political elite, since holders of religious capital could challenge the legitimacy of the principle of Guardianship of the Jurist (the doxa of the field). To remedy this situation, Khamenei and his supporters used a twofold strategy. On the one hand, part of the establishment, in line with Rafsanjani, supported the idea that political requirements, such as ‘political consciousness’ or being ‘familiar with religion as a system of economic, political, social and international dimensions’ (Geling, 1997, pp. 780–781). Notably, most of Khamenei’s supporters ‘spoke about the safeguarding of Islam, the Islamic revolution and Islamic Republic against foreign, hostile powers [italics mine] as the requirement for the position of marja’itaqlid’ (ibid, p. 781). This underlines the increasing importance of the anti-imperialist discourse over traditional religious legitimating resources in the Iranian political field. On the other hand, Khamenei deployed the political, social and economic capital he had accumulated both in the years of the consolidation of the Islamic Republic and in virtue of his new political position to impose the political doxa on a reluctant religious elite. This includes both the mobilisation of ‘state media, patronage networks and security apparatus’ to ‘intimidate and pressure other grand ayatollahs’ into recognising Khamenei as a source of emulation and the appointment and financing of allies within the influential Qom Seminary (Kadivar, 2017, p. 7).

Therefore, despite religious discourses being an important factor for the reproduction of the Islamic Republic’s political order, in terms of power relations in the field of power, the political field is situated in a dominant position with respect to the religious one. As Ansari (2016, p. 57) notes, from this position of domination, the political field has been able to impose its “pragmatic” logic over the religious “idealistic” one. This statement is echoed by empirical examples reported by Geling, such as the acceptance of birth control measures by Ayatollah
Ahmed Jannati, who defined the issue of any fatwa against the government’s policy as harmful to the national interests (Geling, 1997, p. 781).

Thus, the appointment of Khamenei led to the definitive definition of the political capital and to the cementing of the doxa in the political field, which was then internalised by the different positions formed within the field. The formation of these positions dated back to the Khomeini era, in which two factions within the revolutionary establishment emerged: the “left” and the “right”. During the government of Mir Hussein Mousavi, Prime Minister from 1981 to 1989, the former was the dominating position in the field. From this standing, the “left” shaped foreign policy discourse along anti-American and pro-“Third World” lines, with the creation of the three enemies: US imperialism, Zionism and conservative Arab regimes (Hunter, 2010, p. 27, 2014, p. 130). As illustrated above, this discourse received Khomeini’s support, thus facilitating its absorption in the field’s doxa and, consequentially, its acceptance also by the “right” (which, initially, was more concerned with the threat of communism) (see Hunter, 2014, p. 130). Another central aspect of the Iranian foreign policy narrative introduced by the “left” was the exportation of the revolution to the rest of the Middle East (ibid, p. 132). This aspect also received the official support of Khomeini, who not only promoted the idea of ‘neither the West or the East’ in foreign policy but also the necessity of exporting the revolution to the rest of the Middle East (Ardakani, 2007; Kaya and Şartepe, 2015, p. 4; Jenkins, 2016, pp. 160).

However, the internalisation of this doxa affected political and foreign policy discourses in different ways, according to the different positions in the field. For instance, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC), in virtue of its members’ past experience in the trenches during the war against Iraq, fully identifies with the discourses of “export of the revolution” and “resistance”, and so do the bonyads (de jure charitable religious organisations, but de facto financial institutions with consistent economic capital) and, in virtue of its central position in the field, the Supreme Leader (Jenkins, 2016, pp. 160–161). Nonetheless, in the early 1990s, a more flexible and pragmatic discourse became dominant, especially with the rise of Rafsanjani to the presidency. This development was made possible both by the lack of response from the Arab masses to Khomeini’s appeal (Hunter, 2010, p.27) and by the agency of Rafsanjani, who, thanks to his strong revolutionary credentials, his links with the bazaaris (he came from a wealthy merchant family) and the support of a rising new class of technocrats and bureaucrats (Kaya and Şartepe, 2015, p. 4), possessed enough political capital to reinterpret the practical needs of the field. The presidency of Rafsanjani, with his pragmatic approach to the West and
Arab neighbours and his neoliberal economic policies\(^9\), led to a restructuration of the political field. The right faction of the Revolution was divided in two groups. On the one hand was Rafsanjani’s faction, the ‘modernist right’, which had a strong association with the bazaar’s merchants in the economic field and put forward a neoliberal political discourse. On the other hand, a traditional faction, associated with the lower positions in the economic field and with the conservative positions in the religious one, put forth a populist and a quasi-anti-capitalist political discourse that was accompanied by a firm opposition to political liberalisation and to a more “orthodox” foreign policy discourse (see Hunter, 2014, pp. 136–137).

In the same years, the political field experienced the rise of another heterodox position: the reformist movement. This emerged from the ashes of the leftist faction of the revolution, whose members, including Mousavi, Karroubi and Khatami, redefined their political message by shifting from one of ideological puritanism and militant anti-imperialism to one of democratic reformism and integration within the international community. A turning point for the evolution of these personalities was the dismissal of Ali Montazeri, the favoured candidate to succeed Khomeini. After that, with the designation of Khamenei as next Supreme Leader, the faction tried to push for a less literal interpretation of the Guardianship of the Jurist, thus giving more emphasis to democratic credentials as a form of political capital (see Hunter, 2014, p. 139). This position, which was represented by foreign policy discourses centred on the concept of ‘dialogue among civilisations’ and the slogan ‘democracy at home, peace abroad’ (Kaya and Şartepe, 2015, p. 4), favoured the mobilisation of the new social positions, such as a new middle class that emerged from Rafsanjani’s economic reforms and an educated youth (including many women) (Hunter, 2014, p. 150), as well as emerging positions in the cultural field. This accumulation of political capital, which eventually led to Khatami’s electoral victories in 1997 and 2001, was not enough to allow a democratic transformation of the Iranian system nor to lead a profound change in foreign policy discourse, since the orthodox positions in the field successfully blocked the reformist agenda, thanks in part to the support of the Supreme Leader. At the same time, the reformist political discourse led to a strong orthodox discourse coming from a new position within the conservative ranks, represented by Mahmud Ahmadinejad, who surprisingly won the 2005 presidential elections.

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\(^9\) What I refer as neoliberal economic policies in the case of Iran is actually the way the neoliberal paradigm was adapted to the Iranian socio-economic context. As Morgana notes, “neoliberalism in the Iranian context took a more hybrid form, between welfare policies and neoliberal measures” (Morgana, 2020).
Although supported by traditional conservatives, who favoured a stricter interpretation of the Guardianship of the Jurist, and by the Supreme Leader, especially during the controversial re-election in 2009, Ahmadinejad’s faction, which Ehteshami and Zweiri notably called ‘neoconservatives’ (Ehteshami and Zweiri, 2007) presented some notable differences with this position. Neoconservatives, including Ahmadinejad himself, were first politically socialised within the ranks of revolutionary organisations such as the Basij or the IRGC, and many of them (including the then-President) were veterans of the Iran–Iraq war. Therefore, the habitus of this political position is the product of a more “militant” and, in a certain sense, “puritan” process of internalisation of the Khomeinist doxa. Moreover, in terms of position within the field of class struggle, while both modernist and traditional conservatives are linked to the wealthy clergy, bazaar merchants, bureaucrats and professionals, the neoconservatives’ political message aimed to mobilise lower social positions (Ehteshami and Zweiri, 2007, pp. 59–63; Hunter, 2014, pp. 182–183). Importantly, this mobilisation was not based on an appeal to the “working class”. Ahmadinejad himself did not frame the poor masses in class terms, nor did he elaborate an economic programme aiming at the redistribution of wealth (Morgana, 2020). Rather, by relying of the social habitus of these masses, many of whom belonged to an urban proletariat consisting of mostly of migrants from rural areas and who considered ‘religion as the principal factor of their lives’ (Ehteshami and Zweiri, 2007, p. 151), neoconservatives mobilised them through a populist platform based on a fight against corruption and to a return to the original message of the Islamic Revolution. At the same time, the Ahmadinejad government allowed the other social forces supporting the neoconservatives, namely state institutions such as the IRGC, to accumulate wealth through the assignation of lucrative procurement contracts in the fields of construction and energy (see Forozan and Shahi, 2017), thereby enhancing their position in the economic field.

The “return to the origins of the doxa”, that is, to its more orthodox and “pure” form, in accordance with the habitus of the neoconservatives, is also evident in foreign policy discourse. The Ahmadinejad period was marked by a return of an aggressive rhetoric against the West and to a call for oppressed people to resist the ‘arrogant powers’ (see Warnaar, 2013). This strategy of accumulation of political capital, which eventually led to the “Islamic Awakening discourse” during the Arab Spring, also allowed for the accumulation of symbolic capital in the Middle Eastern political space, in which a segment of the Arab public opinion started to look with sympathy towards Ahmadinejad’s alleged ability to stand against the US and Israel (see Morrison, 2006). However, with the controversial landslide victory of Ahmadinejad in the
2009 elections, accusations of fraud and the repression of protests tarnished the prestige of the Iranian political discourse, an aspect that, as I demonstrate in the next chapter, would eventually prevent the Iranian regime from converting its political capital (at the time centred more on anti-imperialist, rather than on democratic, credentials) into symbolic capital during the Arab Spring.

Ultimately, Iranian foreign policy is understood through the lens of a Khomeinist doxa and of the internal struggle within its boundaries between heterodox and orthodox positions. The former, which include reformists like Khatami and, more recently, pragmatic conservatives such as Rafsanjani and Rouhani, mobilised support through the deployment of pro-reform discourses. This sort of “Islamic-democratic principle” produced foreign policy discourses that challenged, or revisited, some of the tenets of Khomeinism (such as anti-imperialism). On their part, orthodox positions such as the conservatives rely on the preservation of the most “primordial” interpretation of the field’s doxa to attract support and maintain their political legitimacy and symbolic capital. As a consequence, they produce foreign policy discourses in line with the Revolution’s anti-imperialist and anti-American tenets, thus reproducing an anti-imperialist principle of vision in the political field and in the Middle East political space. Therefore, the anti-imperialist and pan-Islamic ideological discourses of the Iranian revolution do not necessarily produce a firm anti-American foreign policy or a bid for regional hegemony, as neoclassical and constructivist approaches would suggest (see, among others, Juneau, 2015; or Warnaar, 2013). Rather, these discourses are filtered by the specific conformation of the political field and on the state of the art of the power relations in the field. In the first phase of the Arab Spring, the field was characterised by Ahmadinejad’s discourse of “return to the origins of the revolution”, intended as a more orthodox version of Khomeini’s revolutionary discourses. In this period, therefore, orthodox positions were able to exploit the Arab Spring by deploying their anti-imperialist principle – the Islamic Awakening discourse. In this way, they could adopt a strategy to accumulate political capital at home and preserve their dominant positions in the field while promoting their national political “model” in the regional arena. However, as I explore in the next chapter, this strategy encountered different problems related to both the competition with the Turkish AKP and the incoherence between Iranian foreign policy discourse and the structure of regional politics.

2.3. The Saudi variant
2.3.1 Symbolic and political order: The role of religious discourses in the genesis of the Saudi political field

As illustrated above, the construction and the structure of the political field is influenced by the conformation of the social universe. In particular, the field of cultural production has an important role in it, since the work of categorising social reality (the process Bourdieu calls ‘naming’) leads to the creation of the reality itself, that is, the work of conferring meaning to the social objects is performed ‘in and through struggles in the field of cultural production’ (Bourdieu, 1991b, p. 236). The political field emerges as a “sublimated” representation of these struggles and of class struggles as a whole. In other words, it converts the social reality into visions of political order. For instance, as illustrated above, the domination of a class of nationalist intellectuals in the Ottoman cultural field favoured the rise of nationalist factions in the nascent Turkish political field. A similar and complementary function is played by the fields of production of symbolic goods, that is, the religious field. According to Bourdieu, the structure of the religious field ‘tends to reproduce the structure of relations of force between groups or classes, but under the transfigured and disguised form of a field of relations of force between claimants struggling for the conservation or subversion of the symbolic order’ (Bourdieu, 1991a, p.31). It follows that religious agents and institutions, by reproducing the symbolic order in which they operate, contribute to the maintenance of the political order, ‘that is, to the symbolic reinforcement of the divisions of this order’ (ibid.).

Accordingly, for Bourdieu, political and symbolic order are connected. However, the degree of this connection varies according to the specific cases. In the case of Turkey, for instance, for many years, the secularist nature of dominant nationalist discourse prevented the politicisation of religion, that is, the conversion of religious capital – the religious expertise, knowledge, qualifications and position within religious institutions – into political capital. However, this is not the case for Saudi Arabia. Here, for historical reasons, the religious field has had a better position in the field of power. As a consequence, dominant positions in political and religious fields have developed a close connection. This relationship works differently than the Iranian field of power. In this latter case, as illustrated above, the political field is able to impose its logic on religious discourse. In the Saudi case, by comparison, the two social spheres have a certain degree of autonomy from each other, even though their dominant groups depend on each other to preserve their respective positions of power. In other words, these groups have developed a structural homology in which political agents act to empower their religious allies.
and vice versa. Describing this complex relationship in detail is clearly beyond the aim of both this subsection and of the thesis in general\textsuperscript{10}. Therefore, I limit myself to providing a brief descriptions of those and explaining their impact in the production of foreign policy discourses.

To be sure, the religious field is not the only social microcosm to have influenced the structure of the political arena in Saudi Arabia. In particular, the economic field had a role in the creation, expansion and consolidation of the Saudi state and monarchical regime. As Niblock (1982, pp. 78–88) explains, the merchant class from urban areas played a crucial role in supporting Abd al-Aziz in the construction of the state. Moreover, this group also had a strong social connection with the Wahhabi religious establishment, thus underlying the role of the emerging economic field in influencing the political one as well as in the genesis of the Saudi field of power. Nevertheless, I contend that in terms of foreign policy discourses, especially during the Arab Spring, it is important to analyse the struggle between the political elite and emerging agents in the fields of cultural reproduction. The regional upheaval and the rise of Islamist political actors throughout the Middle East provide the conditions for these cultural and religious agents to convert their capital into symbolic power, thereby challenging the doxa both in their fields and in the political one. Thus, in this perspective, foreign policy functions as a strategy of preservation for the dominant political group. In other words, by adopting an anti-Muslim Brotherhood foreign policy attitude and supporting autocracy in the region, the Saudi regime sought to protect its “stock” of symbolic capital and to legitimise the internal configuration of the political field and of the field of power. This policy was not influenced by geopolitical or identity-based considerations but by the royal family’s drive to preserve its monopoly on political capital. To make sense of the logic of this strategy, it is necessary to analyse the relationship between religious (or symbolic) order and politics in Saudi Arabia from the foundation of the Kingdom.

The proximity between the political and religious fields is at the basis of constructing the Saudi field of power and of the Saudi state. Although the Kingdom was founded in 1932, the Saudi field of power emerged in 1744 with the agreement between the Emir of Diriyah Muhammad bin Saud and the Islamic scholar Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab (Lacroix, 2011, p. 8). This paved the way for the consolidation of the Emirate of Diriyah, also known as the First Saudi State, which lasted from 1744 to 1818. Since then, the Saudi social universe has been dominated by two elites, namely the Saudi royal family and the Wahhabi clerics (a group

\textsuperscript{10}For an account of this relationship, see Lacroix (2011).
dominated by the progeny of al-Wahhab, the Al-Sheik family), which successfully monopolised political and religious power, respectively (ibid, pp. 8–9). As Lacroix (2011, pp. 27–29) illustrates, the capacity of the Saudi royal family to maintain the boundaries of the political field, and therefore to preserve the stability of the Saudi monarchical system rests on the capacity of the political elite to co-opt dominant groups from other fields, especially from the religious one (but also from the intellectual field). This co-opting is achieved through an exchange of symbolic and material resources and serves to depoliticise the field of production of religious goods without necessarily affecting its relative autonomy. This exchange can be exemplified as follows. On the one hand, agents of the political field provide economic capital (in the form of donations to religious foundations) or symbolic capital (in the form of appointments to important positions in the official religious institutions) to the players of the religious field. On the other hand, religious practitioners compete against each other for these resources while at the same time providing religious capital (in the forms of fatawa that legitimise government decisions), which is converted into symbolic resources by members of the royal family.

This exchange of capital has created a homology between the political and religious fields. Accordingly, the strategies for preserving and reproducing the (authoritarian) political order necessitates the conservation of the symbolic one. The struggle between various agents in the religious field has strengthened the logic of the political field in two ways. First, the dominant players in the religious field have an interest in being the beneficiaries of resources granted by the regime, and therefore, they tend to identify themselves (their dominant position in the religious field) with the dominant political actor. Second, the Wahhabi doxa in the field contains principles that transform any contestation of the political order into a breach of the symbolic order. An example of that is the principle of ta’at wali al-amr (obedience to the Emir), which al-Wahhab took from Ahmad ibn Hanbal and which prohibits any open contestation or revolt against the ruler (Sulaib, 2020). Another principle that gained prominence in the Saudi religious field, especially after the collapse of the second Saudi state (1824–1891) caused by internal divisions within the royal family, is jama’a (communal solidarity), which opposed the concept of fitna (division) and supported the idea of a political-religious unity behind a ruler that implements sharia (Steinberg, 2005, pp. 17–18). This configuration of the universe of religious discourses, alongside the homology between dominant religious and political positions, partially explained how the royal family succeeded in maintaining its monopoly of political (and symbolic) capital. However, the Saudi politico-religious discourse is far from
monolithic. As I explore later in this chapter, in certain internal and external conjunctures, the religious field has also represented a source of challenge for the dominant political group.

2.3.2 The Saudi variant of political struggle

Applying the theoretical framework of this thesis to the case of Saudi Arabia is not an easy task. In contrast to the cases of Iran and Turkey, where the presence of elected parliaments make the mechanism of supply and demand that regulates political representation more visible, the political field of Saudi Arabia has an “exclusive membership”. This does not mean that the concept of political field is not applicable to the Saudi case. Rather, it means that the mode of struggle within the field differs in this case. In conceptualising this mode, I drawn upon one of Bourdieu’s writings and the works of Lacroix (2011) on the Saudi religious field. Bourdieu also addresses the issue of the applicability of his theory to authoritarian states, especially in communist republics in Eastern Europe, where the Soviet-style politico-economic order dissipated social classes. In this type of social system, Bourdieu argues that political capital, by acting as a sort of social capital (‘a political type of social capital’, Bourdieu, 1998, p. 16) substitutes the economic one in determining class differentiation and unequal allocation of material resources within the social universe (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 14–18). Thus, in these cases, the possession of social capital, expressed in forms of membership in the Communist Party, seniority within the party’s ranks and even lineage among political dynasties (ibid, p. 17), determines the access to positions of political power. In such social contexts, the main political struggle is fought between the holders of political capital and those actors who, in virtue of possessing a certain cultural capital, are in a better position to question the legitimacy of the political order. This was the case of intellectuals and academics in East Germany (ibid.), or, as illustrated before, Shia clerics in pre-revolutionary Iran.

This framework fits perfectly in the case of Saudi Arabia. As Lacroix explains, among the most important principles of differentiation in the Saudi social universe, alongside the economic and (I would add) religious capitals, is social capital, defined as family lineage (nasab) (Lacroix, 2011, pp. 21–22). Possessing this social capital is an important prerequisite for wielding power in the political field, since members of the royal family have more influence in the decision-making process than high officials who are commoners (ibid, p. 7). Therefore, contrary to the other case studies in which political agents take positions in the field according to the principle of vision and division deployed to mobilise different social classes, in the structure of the Saudi
political field, this is shaped according to networks of family relations, including seniority and patrilineal and matrilineal solidarity\textsuperscript{11}. Given this characteristic of the Saudi political field, political dynamics occur mostly in informal settings kept outside the public eye, while institutions such as the unelected Consultative Council are basically outside the field. To be sure, it is still possible to detect different positions within the field and forms of power struggles among different positions, especially during the regional confrontation against Nasser and pan-Arabism.

In the history of Saudi Arabia, the most famous of these power struggles is likely the confrontation between Saud ibn Abdul Aziz, who succeeded the founder of Saudi Arabia and ruled from 1953 to 1964, and Faisal ibn Abdul Aziz, Prime Minister for most of Saud reign and later King from 1964 to 1975. Interestingly, this confrontation overlapped with another power struggle along “ideological lines”, namely that between Faisal and the so-called Free Princes. At the end of the 1950s, the Saudi kingdom was in a complex conjuncture characterised by both an internal legitimate crisis, due to a mix of King Saud’s mismanagement and social transformations triggered by the oil boom, and external ideological pressure, characterised by the rise of Nasser and Arab nationalism. In this moment of crisis, the political field experienced the emergence of two different visions of the political order. On the one side, Prince Talal ibn Abdul Aziz and the Free Princes supported the creation of an elected assembly and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. On the other side, Faisal supported a more centralised political system that could implement the economic and social programmes needed for the Kingdom (Niblock, 1982, pp. 99–101). At first, the Free Princes seemed to gain momentum when an alliance with King Saud, followed by a cabinet reshuffle, provided them with important offices (Talal was nominated Minister of Finance in 1960). From this position, they proposed a plan for a constitution that would have led to a partially elected parliament. However, King Saud was unwilling to allow any democratic reform and forced Talal to resign (ibid.; see also Nehme, 1994, p. 935). Later, the conflict between Saud and Talal’s faction, as well as the incompetence of the former during the complex period marked also by the civil war in Yemen, eventually facilitated Faisal’s seizure of power, first as the regent in 1962, and then, after overthrowing Saud, as King (see ibid.).

An interesting aspect of the struggle between the Free Princes and Faisal was the way it intertwined with regional ideological rivalries. In the same period, the Arab world was

\textsuperscript{11} This type of structure is also presented in the social universes of one-party states, such as in the cases of communist republics as explained by Bourdieu in \textit{Practical Reason} (Bourdieu, 1998, pp.14–18).
undergoing a “battle of ideas” between pro-Western, conservative monarchies and Arab nationalist regimes, supported by the Soviet Union and led by Nasser. This battle, which Malcom Kerr (1971) described as the ‘Arab Cold War’, was also fought through interventions in the Saudi and Egyptian political fields and field of power. After hearing that he was being pursued by the Royal Guard, Prince Talal flew to Cairo, where he received the support of Nasser and could deliver progressive and anti-establishment statements from the Voice of the Arabs, the transnational radio service used by Nasser to spread his brand of Arab nationalism (Nehme, 1994, p. 935). Moreover, Nasser enjoyed a considerable support among some circles in Saudi military, as testified by the coup attempt in the end of the 1960s (see Mann, 2012, p. 756). On his part, King Faisal responded by mobilising anti-secularist constituencies in Saudi Arabia and in the Arab world. This political strategy included Islamisation at home and pan-Islamic rhetoric in the Middle East, where the Kingdom ‘asserted that the organizing principle of regional politics should be Islam, not Arabism’ (Gause, 2014, pp. 191–192; see also Sindi, 1980; and Lacroix, 2011, p. 41). In doing so, Faisal sought and found the support of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, whose members poured into Saudi Arabia to escape Nasser’s repression. Once in the Kingdom, they were enlisted in the anti-Nasser propaganda machine and held important positions in different fields of society, especially in the educational field, which from the 1960s was dominated by the group (Lacroix, 2011, pp. 41–51).

The challenge of Prince Talal and the Free Princes (who eventually reconciled with the Royal Family in the late 1960s) was the last time agents in the Saudi political field struggled over different visions of the political order. Since then, the structure of the political field mainly followed the royal family’s matrilineal lines. By the early 2000s, the Saudi political field was essentially divided in two main positions: the Sudairis (the sons of the most powerful among King Abdul Aziz’s wives, Hussa bint Ahmed al-Sudairi) and Abdullah (the chief of the National Guard, Regent and Crown Prince from 1995 to 2005 and then King until 2015) (Glosemeyer, 2005, pp. 217–219; Yamani, 2008, pp. 144–145; Lacroix, 2011, pp. 238–240). These two positions followed two different strategies of accumulation of political capital, based on their capacity to build networks of relations within the Saudi society, that is, to convert social into political capital. As Lacroix illustrates, the Sudairis (which at the time of the Arab Spring were Minister of Internal Affairs Nayef and Minister of Defence Sultan, as well as Governor of Riyadh, and the future King, Salman) had their historical powerbase in the religious field. On his part, in contrast, King Abdullah developed an alliance with moderate reformists in the intellectual field (Lacroix, 2011, pp. 238–240).
Despite the existence of different positions and strategies, since the dismissal of the Free Princes, the main site of political struggle in Saudi Arabia shifted from the field of politics to the field of power. Saudi Arabia therefore represents a particular case of the mode of power struggle explained above, in which the challengers to the political order are not members of the political field but rather those cultural agents who are able to question the very legitimacy of the order. In the Saudi case, these agents are the holders of religious capital. One of the enduring consequences of Faisal’s policy of modernisation and Islamisation has been the appreciation of this form of capital within the Saudi social universe. This led to the creation of new social positions. From the 1960s, for instance, the Saudi religious field experienced the rise of the Al-Sahwa Al-Islamiyya movement (Islamic Awakening, not to be confused with the already mentioned Iranian foreign policy discourse). The habitus of the Sahwa is the outcome of a process of its members’ socialisation within an educational field dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and the internalisation of the religious field’s Wahhabi doxa. This can be described as a combination of the Brotherhood’s political and socio-cultural discourse with Wahhabi religious practices (ibid, pp. 37–80). The movement emerged in the 1970s and became a prominent player not only in the production of religious goods but, through alliances with other social positions, also in the intellectual and educational one. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Sahwa had a positive relationship with the Saudi regime. However, this state of affairs changed in the early 1990s following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, when the government allowed the deployment of American troops in its territory both to protect the Kingdom against the perceived threat posed by Saddam Hussein and to lead the military effort to liberate its small neighbour. The controversial decision was the object of harsh criticism by both ulama and intellectuals from the Sahwa movement as well as from other more radical positions in the Saudi religious field (such as Jihadists and Salafists), which revealed the revolutionary potential of religious-inspired political discourse in the Kingdom (see Lacroix, 2011).

This case underlines the nature of the political struggle in Saudi Arabia, which is essentially a struggle between holders of political capital and holders of religious capital. In this struggle, the latter, a group that included positions at the margins of the dominant Wahhabi group (that is, the Sahwa) and lower positions (such as Jihadists or Shiites), but not the Wahhabi establishment (which supported the regime), questioned the monopoly of symbolic violence of the political class through the deployment of religious discourses. This has occurred whenever an external event, including a foreign policy choice made by the regime, could question the Islamic credentials of the regime itself. An example of this is the above-mentioned request for
direct American intervention in the Gulf. In comparison, the Iranian revolution, by presenting a different principle of vision that combined religious and political order, was a mobilising force for the Shiites in the Eastern Province (see, for instance, Jones, 2006). However, the main challenge to the doxa of the political field was carried out by an alliance between prominent Sahwa sheiks (such as Salman al-Awda) who accumulated religious capital and prestige through their opposition to the deployment of American troops during the Gulf and the so-called Islamo-liberals. This was a new position in the intellectual field that included liberals, Shiites and Sunni Islamists and that called for democratic change within an Islamist framework (Lacroix, 2005, pp. 35–36).

The Islamo-liberals emerged in the late 1990s as a coalition of former radicals and minor Sahwa sheiks (ibid, p. 42) and gained momentum after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, when, under increasing external pressure (especially from the US), the Saudi regime started to crack down on extremist elements in the Kingdom while enabling more space to discuss religion and society. In this environment, the group presented two open petitions. The first, called the ‘Vision for the Present and the Future of the Homeland’, was presented to Crown Prince Abdullah and a dozen members of the royal family in January 2003. It was framed in a religious language, ‘to root [the] reformist discourse in Islam’ (ibid, p. 51). In that case, even though the Sahwa members were not among the signatories, the initiative was emboldened by the support of Abdullah (ibid, pp. 50–52). Eventually, the Sahwa supported a second petition in December 2003, named the ‘Patriotic Appeal to the People and the Government – Constitutional Reform First’. This petition criticised the slow pace of reforms and explicitly called for the establishment of a constitutional monarchy within three years (ibid, pp. 52–54, see Lacroix, 2011, pp. 247–248). This marked both the emergence of a religious-democratic principle of vision in the Saudi social space and an unprecedented challenge to the monopoly of political capital of the House of Saud and, thus, of the very doxa of the political field.

An interesting aspect of the “petitions period” is the reaction of the political agents. At first, Abdullah supported the reformist discourse by proposing moderate reforms, including the establishment of a National Dialogue among social actors and the announcement of municipal elections (held for the first time in 2005, and extended to women in 2015). This approach earned him the reputation of ‘the man of dialogue and reform’ (al-Rasheed, 2005, pp. 210–211) and allowed for an accumulation of prestige among intellectuals and reformist ulama. After the December 2003 petition, however, the political field was united in dealing with the challenge it was presented. Before the publication of the petition, Prince Nayef took the
initiative to summit some of the signatories to warn them about the potential repercussions (Glosemeyer, 2005, p. 228). Despite the meeting, the petition was published anyway, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs started a crackdown that sent many supporters of the initiative to prison. Despite the initiative being carried out by the most “orthodox position” in the field, that is, Prince Nayef, ‘these arrests were made possible by Abdullah’s change of direction because of his exasperation at the radicalization of Islamo- liberal demands’ (Lacroix, 2011, p. 248). This showed how the political agents tended to be united in preserving the boundaries of the field. This tendency was even more evident in 2011, when the Arab Spring and the spread of democratisation seemed to embolden those pro-reform societal actors. On that occasion, Saudi foreign policy worked as a conservation strategy for the internal order, based on a monopoly of political capital in the hands of a small elite and on a subservient religious field. Moreover, it also worked in the direction of re-establishing a complementary principle of vision and division in the other Arab political field, which we can call the “authoritarian principle”.

In conclusion, while my approach would agree with others on the fact that Saudi foreign policy is motivated by the regime’s preservation strategies (see, among others, Gause, 2015; Ryan, 2015; Watkins, 2020), Bourdieu’s field-theoretical lens allows us to better conceptualise these strategies. Because of the role the religious field played in creating the Saudi field of power, and of the consequent value of religious capital, the most relevant power struggle in the Kingdom is not the one between the different positions in the political field but rather between holders of political capital and holders of religious capital. This is a struggle that is situated in the field of power and that has been often triggered by external events, which are exploited by certain agents in the religious field (and by their allies in the intellectual one) to question the legitimacy of the existing dominant vision of the political order. As I illustrate in Chapter 4, in the case of the Arab Spring, the rise to power of political parties linked to the Muslim Brotherhood in the region created the conditions for questioning the legitimacy of the authoritarian principle that governs the logic of the political field in Saudi Arabia, thereby emboldening those positions in the religious and cultural fields with enough capital to make a credible appeal for change. Facing this challenge, the regime deployed a counterrevolutionary foreign policy to “export” its authoritarian vision of the political order into the regional political space.

2.4. Conclusions
This chapter provided an overview of the political struggles in the fields of the three case studies, particularly focusing on the factors that explain the foreign policy discourses deployed during the Arab Spring. By using Bourdieu’s theoretical lens and, in particular, the concept of political field, I have demonstrated that the three models of governance taken into consideration in this thesis are the outcomes of particular historical and political conditions that led to the formation of the political fields and to the differentiation of the various positions within these fields. As far as Turkey is concerned, the Turkish model is the result of a strategy of subversion (at least initially) of the field’s doxa. This foreign policy discourse is the product of the historical trajectory of a political agent, the AKP, which successfully challenged the pre-existing political order. This strategy was based on an appeal to the democratisation of Turkish politics, which was the only way to integrate the “heir” of the Islamic movement into the Kemalist political field while at the same time mobilising its core religious constituency. For this reason, I referred to this discourse as the democratic-religious principle of vision and division. In the case of the Iranian model, the political field was established following a power struggle among the different factions of the revolution, in which anti-imperialism was a fundamental strategy of accumulating prestige and, thus, symbolic capital that Khomeini successfully deployed against the secular and leftist opposition. In this sense, the anti-West discourse has become an important aspect of the field’s doxa and an indispensable source of political capital for the orthodox positions in the field. Therefore, we can describe the principle of vision and division informing Ahmadinejad’s faction and the Supreme Leader Khamenei as an anti-imperialist principle. Finally, in Saudi Arabia, the core aspect of the doxa of the political field is its “exclusive membership”, which is preserved through political agents’ careful monitoring of the fields of cultural reproduction, especially of the religious field. In other words, the political elite seeks to avoid politicising the religious discourse, which would lead the holders of religious power to question the boundaries of the political field. In this thesis, I opt to call this principle of vision of the social order the authoritarian principle, which is usually expressed in the form of “preservation of stability”, or as an “anti-terror struggle”, as I demonstrate in Chapter 4.

In light of this analysis, this thesis argues that, to grasp the impact of national political struggles on Middle East politics, it is necessary to understand how these principles of vision are reflected in foreign policy discourses. During the Arab Spring, foreign policy functioned as a strategy of preservation (especially in the Saudi case) and a means to export principles of domination into the regional political space (especially in the Turkish and Iranian cases). In this way, a
Bourdieu-inspired approach centred on the political field offers a significant contribution within the literature. While acknowledging, as in certain realist approaches, that political actors use foreign policy to preserve their power, my field-theoretical approach offers the analytical tools for understanding both the roots of domestic power and the mechanisms through which external dynamics can embolden or threaten them. At the same time, while accepting the significance of ideational constructs in determining foreign policy, the field-theoretical lens has some analytical advantages over other approaches. By conceptualising these constructs as a “principle of vision and division” (rather than as “identities”, “roles”, etc.), we can connect these discourses to power relations and grasp the dynamics through which they emerge, are contested and change. Finally, my Bourdieu-inspired approach differs from those analyses that look at state–society relations as a determinant of the international behaviour of Middle East elites. As illustrated above, the social structure does not determine foreign policy discourses and attitudes directly, as, in a certain way, implied by the scholarship on historical sociology in IR (see, for instance, Hobson, Lawson and Rosenberg, 2010). The demands that arise from the social structure are “filtered” by political agents. These carry out a power struggle that follows its own practical necessities, which are autonomous from the other fields of the social universe. Therefore, the site of production of foreign policy discourses is the political field, and this production depends on how the field functions and on the power relations within the field itself. This point is demonstrated in the analysis of foreign policy behaviour of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia, which unfolds in the next three chapters.
Chapter 3

Turkey, Iran and the symbolic struggle for the Arab Spring

This chapter examines the impact of the outbreak of the Arab Spring on Turkish and Iranian regional policies. Specifically, it considers their foreign policy discourses during the initial phase of the Arab Spring from 2011 to 2013. In this period, as authoritarian governments began to collapse one after another, the issue of the principles of domestic governance was placed at the centre of regional politics, thereby fostering a competition between different political models. This competition became one of the main drivers of foreign policies of the main regional actors, including the AKP government and the Iranian regime. The Turkish and Iranian models were regarded as two possible paths for the future of governance in the Middle East (Duran and Yilmaz, 2013; Goksel, 2013; Khatib and Ghanem, 2018). These particular political discourses and the various themes associated with them (“democracy”, “reformism”, “politico-religious legitimacy” or “anti-Zionism”, etc.) are the outcomes of specific historical and political conditions. Specifically, the Turkish model discourse is part of a strategy of accumulation of political capital produced by the habitus of the AKP. As such, it is the product of the historical trajectory of this particular political agent in the Turkish political field. The Iranian model, or Islamic Awakening, discourse, meanwhile, corresponds to the configuration of the Iranian political field, which tends to reward anti-imperialist foreign policy discourses. This strategy of accumulation has been adopted by orthodox positions such as Supreme Leader Khamenei and Ahmadinejad’s neconservatives.

Therefore, Turkish and Iranian attitudes towards the Arab Spring are shaped by the configuration of their respective national political fields. They not only reflect the positions of the policymakers in the national struggle for political power but are also adopted with the aim of enhancing these positions. Thus, more than national interests, identities and roles, Turkey’s and Iran’s competing bids for domination during the regional upheaval is explained through the strategies of accumulation of political capital adopted by the AKP and the Iranian conservatives actors. However, this tells us just a fraction of the story. To have a more complete
picture, it is crucial to understand these strategies in relation to and competition with each other in the regional political space. As illustrated in Chapter 1, when political agents perform foreign policy discourses, they act as double agents. On the one hand, these discourses cannot be separated from nationally situated political struggles. On the other, they are also situated in a political space in which discourses and ideas circulate among different national political fields. These two dimensions are intertwined in what can be called a “double game”.

In this game, political agents interpret international events according to their habitus and to the practical necessities of their national field in a way to discursively frame a political message that mobilises their social base and guarantees an accumulation of political capital. Simultaneously, the international circulation of these discourses provides the opportunity to externalise political messages (models, categories, ideologies, etc.). This could lead to the conversion of national political capital into “international” symbolic capital. The Arab Spring is a perfect example of this. By questioning the authoritarian political order in different fields (including the Egyptian political field, which, for historical reasons, is one of the most important in the Middle East), the regional uprising paved the way to redefine the principles of governance and political legitimacy. Thus, in a certain sense, the symbolic struggle for the Arab Spring resembled what Villumsen Berling (2012) calls a ‘doxic battle’, which refers to a period of uncertainty in which the doxa is questioned, opening the possibility for fundamental change. In this scenario, both Turkish and Iranian agents tried to impose forms of political capital and principles of vision and division that were products of their respective domestic political experiences as the new doxa of the post-revolutionary political fields. In contrast, the Saudi regime defended authoritarian order in the region, thus opposing any change that would have provoked a depreciation of the political capital it possessed.

A central aspect of this struggle is the relationship between the various national fields. The capacity of a certain principle of vision to reshape the regional space depends on the coincidence between the ‘conditions of possibility’ (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 25–26) in the field of production and in the fields of reception. In other words, the successful conversion of national political capital into symbolic capital (which is necessary to define the new doxa of a field) is possible only if the agents’ discourses correspond to the realities of the field of reception and of the universe of political discourse in the international political space. This condition means that other agents “borrow” and replicate this discourse or principle to enhance their positions in their political fields, while, at the same time, empowering those agents that produce this principle by recognising, implicitly or explicitly, its universality. These dynamics create the
condition of a ‘hegemonic field effect’ (Nexon and Neumann, 2018; McCourt, 2021), the imposition of the logic of one field to another.

In the case of the Arab Spring, the Iranian position presented a significant challenge. If, on the one hand, the demands for freedom, democracy and human rights delegitimised those regimes supported by the West (such as Mubarak’s), on the other, the protests also marked a shift away from the traditional anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist themes that often dominated regional politics and since 1979 have been monopolised by the Iranian-led ‘axis of resistance’ (Hinnebusch, 2014, pp. 68–69). Consequently, the political movements that emerged in Tunisia, Egypt and other countries in the region had no interest in adopting a political discourse inspired by the Iranian Revolution. At the same time, the conditions were more favourable to the AKP, whose political experience was regarded as a possible model to be applied in post-Arab Spring regional politics. This encouraged the party to engage with the upheaval and develop a relationship of homology with religious groups linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, which became the vehicle for an Arab reinterpretation of the Turkish model. Therefore, in the initial phase of the Arab Spring, the AKP’s democratic-religious principle emerged as the rising position in the Middle Eastern politics, while the Iranian anti-imperialist principle failed to yield symbolic capital. This aspect explained why the AKP persisted in this foreign policy stance, even when the uncompromising support for the revolutions jeopardised important diplomatic and economic interests (as in the case of Syria).

This chapter focuses on the initial phase of the Arab Spring, when regional politics were more fluid and susceptible to the rise of new ideas, categories and principles. In this situation, the Turkish–Iranian competition for imposing a new principle of domination was particularly important in shaping the dynamics of the regional upheavals. For the Saudi regime, the weight of its foreign policy and of its political discourse became more significant at a later stage with the beginning of the “counterrevolution”. Chapter 3 is organised into four sections. First, it offers an overview of the relations between the changing Middle East scenario before the Arab Spring and the struggles in the political fields of Turkey and Iran. In particular, it explores the emergence and development of the AKP’s democratic-religious principle by focusing on how foreign policy discourses were a crucial part of the party’s accumulation of political capital at home, as well as how this internal success enhanced its prestige in regional politics. Moreover, this section also illustrates the loss of prestige and democratic credentials suffered by the Iranian political agents in power during the controversial 2009 elections. This is an aspect that is crucial to understanding the Iranian political model’s relative lack of prestige during the
outbreak of the Arab Spring. Second, the chapter illustrates the competition between foreign policy discourses of the two cases under consideration. Third, the chapter puts in relation the Turkish–Iranian competition with the developments of the other political fields in the Middle East political space before finally drawing out the conclusions.

3.1 The political field and the international: Turkey, Iran and the double game in the Middle East

The Turkish–Iranian competition was particularly important during the initial phase of the Arab Spring since the Turkish and the Iranian models were considered as two possible paths for political development in the Arab world (see Goksel, 2013; Khatib and Ghanem, 2018). This was not the case for the Saudi authoritarian style of governance. However, the Saudi regime was able to play a greater a more active role in shaping regional politics by leading the counterrevolution. This point is developed in Chapter 4, while this chapter focuses on how the political fields of Turkey and Iran influenced these countries’ foreign policy behaviour in the initial phase of the Arab Spring. As I demonstrated in Chapter 2, the Turkish and Iranian models corresponded to the strategies of accumulation of political capital (in the form of the principles of vision and division) of specific political agents in the political fields of these states, namely, the AKP and the Iranian conservative coalition.

In the first case, Section 2.1 illustrates how the AKP’s strategy of accumulation of political capital consisted of a combination of pro-democracy and socially conservative discourses. This strategy was able to mobilise different segments within Turkish society while preserving the core Islamist constituency. The AKP’s democratic principle of vision and division emerged as the dominant position in a political field that was experiencing a dramatic change in its fundamental assumptions. In Iran, as explained in Section 2.2, at the end of the 2000s there were three main positions in the field: the reformists, the modernist (or pragmatic) right and a coalition of conservative agents (which include both an older and a newer generation known as the neoconservatives). The first two positions have developed a heterodox political discourse, thus tempering certain aspects of Khomeinism in terms of both the internal governance and foreign policy discourse. However, since 2005, the conservative group (also known as Principists) returned to power, thus marking a return to a more orthodox version of anti-imperialist and revolutionary discourses in foreign policy. Therefore, the previous chapter presents the basis of my analysis of the Turkish and Iranian models (as well as of the Saudi
model, which will be further discussed in the next chapter). However, what it is still missing from the picture is the interaction between these two political fields and Middle East politics. This aspect is crucial to grasp the role of these model discourses in the strategies of accumulation of political capital as well as the position of the Turkish and Iranian political fields and the value of their political capital within the regional space before the Arab Spring. This section aims to clarify this point by outlining the Turkish and Iranian double game in the Middle East.

3.1.1 The rise of the Turkish model discourse: The AKP’s democratic-religious principle in the changing Middle East

The changes in the Middle East political space have allowed the AKP to carve out a considerable position within it. However, this position cannot be fully understood without considering the domestic political field, in which the AKP had pursued a strategy of subverting the pre-existent political doxa. This kind of strategies ‘take the form of a more or less radical rupture with the dominant group by challenging its legitimacy to define the standards of the field’ (Swartz, 1997, p. 125). As described in Section 2.2, the subversion was carried out through the promotion of a “pro-democracy discourse” that gradually delegitimised the Kemalist elite. However, this strategy cannot be grasped without taking into consideration the interaction between the political field and the international dimension. This connection was identified by party officials. For instance, in an article outlining the framework, values and mechanisms of Turkish foreign policy, Ibrahim Kalin, spokesperson of President Erdoğan, explicitly mentions changes in the domestic politics and AKP’s message of democratisation:

*Embracing multiple identities in domestic and foreign policy has become a hallmark of AKP governments since 2002. Seeking to create a new form of conservative modernity out of Turkey’s checkered experience of top-down modernization, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has come to symbolize this new synthesis, and he has embraced such values as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law without giving up on the traditional, conservative values of Turkish-Islamic culture. This has enabled, for instance, Erdoğan to mobilize the conservative segments of the Turkish people to support Turkey’s EU membership in 2004 and 2005, and to establish closer relations with Muslim nations and publics around the world. Erdoğan’s successive electoral victories in the 2002, 2007, and 2011 national elections show the extent to which his conservative modernity has been*
In this passage, Kalin offers an outline of the democratic-religious principle: a combination of democratic and conservative values, represented in a foreign policy able to combine EU membership and good relations with the Muslim Middle East. The double role of Kalin as both a scholar and a politician (a condition he shares with Ahmet Davutoğlu) reflects also the importance of academic discourse in the Turkish model (see Benhaïm and Öktem, 2015) as well as of the close relations between the academic and political fields. The emergence of the Turkish model discourse in academia and its absorption into the political discourse were enabled by the international circumstances. In particular, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, which revealed the complex relations between globalisation and Islam, and the subsequent global War on Terror, Turkey, as a Muslim state committed to democracy, secularism, Western institutions and free-market economy, was perceived as bearing a special responsibility in the Middle East. This perception was particularly relevant in the American academic field, where, in a period marked by the rise of the “clash of civilisation” discourse, the Turkish model was presented as a possible solution that combined Islam with democracy and good relations with America and the West (Duran and Yılmaz, 2013, p. 155; Iğsiz, 2014; Benhaïm and Öktem, 2015). This discourse soon circulated in the Turkish academic and political fields, thereby opening new discursive spaces for those agents willing to challenge the Kemalist doxa.

These “inputs” from outside the field were converted and adapted not just to the conditions of the national political field but also to the surrounding Middle East political space in a way that made the AKP political message more appealing to the regional audience. In reproducing the Turkish model discourse, AKP officials were careful to distance themselves from the American neconservative style of democratisation. The AKP foreign policy discourse placed the party in a different position than the American right as well as Middle Eastern autocracies and Iranian anti-imperialism. For instance, in explaining the new course of Turkey’s regional policy, Davutoğlu stressed the AKP government’s ability to maintain ‘a position of promoting civil liberties without undermining security’, which is presented as a considerable ambition ‘in the post-September 11 environment, under the threat of terrorism, in which the general tendency has been to restrict liberties for the sake of security’ (Davutoğlu, 2008, p. 79). In a 2004 interview with Al-Hayat, then-Minister of Foreign Affairs (and President of the Republic from 2007 to 2014) Abdullah Gül called for domestic reforms in in the Arab world to prevent further
American adventurism. On this occasion, Gül stressed that American interference in the Middle East was ineffective and illegitimate since ‘they don’t understand our sensitivities, our habits, our cultures and our social structure’ (Gül, 2004, as quoted by Murinson, 2006, p. 953, italics mine).

This discourse, which combines democratic practices and identification with the region’s cultural and social context, marks a clear break with the Kemalist and traditional practices. During the Cold War, foreign policy discourses concerning modernity, identity and democracy, tended to come from “orthodox” secularist positions within the field (with the only exception of Turgut Özal; see Laciner, 2009). For instance, in reference to the accession to NATO, then-Prime Minister Suleiman Demirel – at the time leader of the secularist centre-right Justice Party – spoke of a ‘manifestation of the identity of fate among […] countries embracing freedom and democratic ideals’ (Demirel, 1968, quoted in Vali, 1971, p. 125, and in Bozdağlıoğlu, 2003, pp. 66–67). At the same time, interactions with the Middle East were kept at a minimum, if not labelled as a threat to the civilising mission started by Atatürk (see Bozdağlıoğlu, 2003). As illustrated in Section 2.2, for instance, it is not by chance that the generals, in criticising both domestic and foreign policies of Erbakan in the 1990s, affirmed that they were willing to make Turkey ‘a modern country with values like those of any European country or the United States’ (quoted in Kinzer, 1997). Given this past configuration of the field, it is not a surprise that Western academia’s promotion of Turkey as a model of Muslim democracy for the Middle East left the Kemalist position, in Kalin’s words, ‘disenfranchised’ (Kalin, 2009, p.93), deprived of a fundamental discursive tool. More importantly, the adoption of this discourse within a democratic-religious principle by the AKP created a “virtuous circle” in which the accumulation of political capital at home went hand in hand with the accumulation of symbolic capital in the Middle East political arena. As the AKP’s position in the political field was consolidating, its political ideas, programmes and discourses were debated with interest and admiration by some Arab intellectuals, thus making the Turkish model a theme of increasing interest in the region’s intellectual fields even before the Arab Spring (see, for instance, Kalin, 2009; Samaan, 2013).

An important aspect of the AKP’s accumulation of symbolic capital was its discourse associated with Israel. Under the Kemalist establishment, Turkish–Israeli ties were strong and

12 ‘If we don’t take the reins … and prefer to cover up and ignore them [our problems], then others [the United States] will try to solve them their way and interfere in our affairs’ (Gül, 2004, as quoted in Murinson, 2006, p. 953).
friendly\textsuperscript{13}. However, under the AKP, these relations took another direction. The break with Tel Aviv was functional in aligning the AKP with the dominant discourse within most political fields in the Middle East, thereby aligning the Turkish political field to the regional political space and, consequently, accumulating symbolic capital. The deterioration of relations started before the well-known May 2010 Gaza flotilla raid. In fact, since 2002, the AKP has openly criticised Israel’s treatment of Palestinians several times. This criticism reached a peak during the 2008–2009 Gaza conflict. Of particular significance was the famous debate held between Erdoğan and then-Israeli President Shimon Peres at Davos in the aftermath, which resulted in an enhancement of prestige both at home and in the Middle East for the then-Turkish Prime Minister (see Euractive, 2009). The Gaza flotilla raid, which resulted in the killing of nine Turkish nationals by the Israeli Defence Forces, and the following Turkish response and deterioration of relations led to an increase in Erdoğan’s prestige in the regional political debate, to the point that, by the end of 2010, Arab media compared the Turkish leader to Gamal Abd al-Nasser (Samaan, 2013, pp. 62, 64).

A survey conducted in 2011 reported an overall favourable opinion of Turkey within Arab public opinions. All the countries considered, with the only exception of Jordan (45%), where anti-Ottoman sentiments are part of the founding myth of the state, share a favourable opinion of Ankara. Turkey’s popularity reached impressive peaks in Saudi Arabia (98%) and in Lebanon (93%). Moreover, Turkey was also considered to positively contribute to peace and stability in the Arab world (Zogby, 2011). These views reflected the above-mentioned state of the debate in the Arab world, in which the idea that Turkey could have been a democratic model for the Middle East was widely discussed. This prestige was accompanied by further signs of recognition from regional governments, such as the election of Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu as Secretary-General of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in 2004 (the first Turkish national to hold the position). Moreover, since 2002, the AKP government has improved relations with Iran and Syria\textsuperscript{14}. As a result, at the dawn of the Arab Spring, the AKP placed itself in a prestigious position in the Middle Eastern political debate. These developments demonstrate the capacity of the AKP to convert domestic sources of political capital (such as economic and electoral successes) into symbolical capital to be spent in the region.

\textsuperscript{13}Turkey was the first Muslim state to establish relations with Israel, in 1949.

\textsuperscript{14}In September 2009, Ahmet Davutoğlu signed an agreement with Syria’s Foreign Minister Walid al-Mouallim that ended visa requirements between Ankara and Damascus (see Phillips, 2011, p. 34). This was considered by Erdogan administration as a first step to a more ambitious project, the creation of a free trade zone between Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan (Baudner, 2014, p. 93).
3.1.2 The Iranian political field at the dawn of the symbolic struggle

The changes that occurred in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks also had profound implications in the Iranian political field. As illustrated in Section 2.2, in the early 2000s the field was characterised by two types of political discourse. The first was an orthodox principle of vision and division, embodied by both an old and a new generation of conservative politicians. This coalition of agents emphasised the commitment to a strict interpretation of the Guardianship of the Jurist (especially by the old guard) and to anti-imperialist and revolutionary credentials as the main form of legitimation within the field. The conservative camp was opposed by heterodox positions, namely the modernist right and the reformists. Although these two positions diverged in many aspects, they shared a common tendency to discuss the limits of the field’s doxa, especially regarding the language to be used in addressing the West and Middle Eastern actors like Saudi Arabia. In the case of the modernist right, led by Rafsanjani, a more pragmatic foreign policy discourse was functional to his economic liberalisation programme. In the case of the reformist camp, the revision of the orthodox revolutionary and anti-Western foreign policy discourse went along with a challenge to an orthodox interpretation of the Guardianship of the Jurist, according to the slogan “democracy at home, peace abroad”.

The 9/11 attacks opened new discursive spaces for those positions in the political field that intended to challenge the dominant principle of vision of the socio-political order. The basis for this challenge was already set by Khatami’s dialogue of civilisations discourse. Framed as a response to the academic discourse associated with Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilizations’ (Poulson, 2009, p. 30; see also Huntington, 1993), this discourse also represented a rebuttal of the more orthodox anti-imperialist foreign policy discourse. The new discourse succeeded in obtaining some form of recognition in the international arena. Notably, the Iranian UN delegation managed to have 2001 designated as the year for dialogue among civilisations, thus marking an increase of prestige for Khatami (Poulson, 2006, 2009). The 9/11 attacks seemed to create momentum for the reformist movement. Khatami along with the whole political spectrum, including orthodox political positions, condemned the attacks and vocalised their outrage (Poulson, 2009, p. 30), while within the Iranian social universe, numerous actors were quick to clarify the differences between jihadism and the ‘true Islam’ (Heradstveit and Bonham, 2007, pp. 430–431). Notably, in expressing their condemnation, they were careful to

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15 Importantly, Khatami does not deny Khomeini’s vision of world order completely. Indeed, he uses some of the language of the founding father of the Islamic Republic, especially when he presents the world as being divided between ‘oppressor’ and ‘oppressed’. However, Khatami does not see this as an obstacle to the construction of a dialogue between these two positions (see Khatami, 2012).
not step out of line with the anti-imperialist principle. For instance, Khamenei implied that American policies in the region had a role in creating the hostility towards the US (Poulson, 2009, p. 30). Nevertheless, the coincidence between Khatami’s foreign policy discourse, the partial relaxation of anti-Americanism and the American–Iranian cooperation against the Taliban regime (see Dobbins, 2010) seemed to create the conditions for profound change in the Iranian field of production of political discourses.

These conditions were jeopardised by the infamous “Axis of Evil speech”, delivered on January 2002 by then-US President George W. Bush, in which Iran (alongside Iraq and North Korea) was portrayed as the main source of any malicious activity in world politics. Within the Iranian political field, the pronouncement of the speech led to a loss of credibility of the reformist discourse. One of the consequences of Bush’s speech was the “rediscovery” of Khomeini’s “Great Satan discourse” as a source of political capital, which emboldened conservative factions who built their defence of the field’s orthodoxy on a marked scepticism towards the possibility to dialogue with the US (Heradstveit and Bonham, 2003, 2007). Consequently, these positions exploited the “discursive opening” offered by Bush to mobilise political capital against the reformist movement. Among the tactics used by these positions there was accusing the reformists of being an American tool for destabilising the Islamic system (Poulson, 2009, pp. 35–36). It would, however, be exaggerated to say that the collapse of the reform movement was due to the “Axis of Evil speech”. In the early 2000s, the reformist movement found itself in an uncomfortable situation. One the one hand, as a political player, the movement had to respect the rules of the game, including the authority of the Supreme Leader. On the other hand, this position accumulated political capital by mobilising social actors (especially intellectuals and students) who wished for a democratic transformation of the political order. This awkward balance was broken with the students riots of 1999 and 2002, which were marked by an unprecedented challenge against the political doxa (see ibid, pp. 36–37), as well as by an equally unprecedented counter-mobilisation led by the IRGC and Basij (Ehteshami and Zweiri, 2007, pp. 21–26). In the end, Khatami tried to introduce a reform that would have strengthened the position of the elected President. However, in April and May 2003, the Guardian Council vetoed the proposal (Vick, 2003), thus marking the triumph of an orthodox interpretation of the Guardianship of the Jurist in the field.

The “revival” of the anti-American sentiment following Bush’s speech and American neoconservative policies in the region helped the strategies of the orthodox positions, thus making the anti-imperialist principle of vision of the political order, centred on the notion of
“resistance”, the main strategy for the mobilisation of political capital against any attempt at political reform. Among the members of the conservative coalition, Ahmadinejad’s faction was the most vocal in deploying this discourse, making anti-imperialist credentials the main source of political legitimacy in the field as well as the distinctive characteristic of the Iranian political capital in the Middle East political space. As mentioned in Section 2.2, the new foreign policy discourse should be put into the context of the Iranian neoconservatives’ position in the national political field, which was characterised by a return to the “values of the revolution”, that is, a more orthodox political and foreign policy discourse. Another aspect of this strategy was the hard-line position on the issue of the nuclear programme. Khatami’s availability to accommodate the Western (and Arab) concerns through diplomatic compromise, even in the face of intransigence demonstrated by the Bush administration, weakened his standing against the conservatives. On the contrary, Ahmadinejad’s firmer stance, which combined resistance against the ‘bullying powers’ and a claim of patriotic credentials (see Warnaar, 2013, pp. 137–152), allowed his government to accumulate more prestige in the field.

In the Middle East political space, the position of Ahmadinejad’s faction was characterised by the deployment of an anti-imperialist principle of vision of the political and regional order, which gravitated around the so-called “Axis of Resistance”, an alliance that includes the Islamic Republic, Bashar al-Assad’s regime, the Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas. During the rise of Ahmadinejad’s neoconservative faction (most of whose members both in the government and in the Parliament came from the IRGC), the Axis of Resistance occupied a central place in foreign policy discourse, a strategy that was fully backed by the state apparatus (Stein, 2021, pp. 170–171); this underscored the support of the traditional conservatives, including Khamenei. A central aspect of the Axis of Resistance and of the anti-imperialist principle is the characterisation of Israel as an illegitimate entity, as well as the presentation of Iran as the protector of Palestinian rights. While this animosity towards Israel was not new to the Iranian field of production of political discourse, with Ahmadinejad the anti-Zionist theme reached a new relevance and experienced a further radicalisation, especially with the questioning of the Holocaust and the “invitation” to reallocate the Israeli state within Europe16. Such provocative language drew condemnation not only in America and Europe but also in the region (by the Israelis, but also from Turkey and Saudi Arabia) and within the Iranian political field, where even the conservative allies were stunned by the aggressiveness of the President’s

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16 ‘Although we don’t accept this claim [the Holocaust], if we suppose it is true, if the Europeans are honest they should give some of their provinces in Europe – like in Germany, Austria or other countries – to the Zionists and the Zionists can establish their state in Europe’ (Ahmadinejad, 2005, as quoted in Ehteshami and Zweiri, 2007, p. 110).

The anti-Zionist rhetoric, which is usually considered within the framework of the regime’s broader foreign policy discourse aimed at denouncing the hypocrisy and the illegitimacy of the American-led world order (Warnaar, 2013), also had implications in the Middle East political space. The post-9/11 regional scenario was characterised by a sort of competition for the “monopolisation” of the representation of the “moderate Islam”. In this scenario, the AKP had exploited the Turkish model discourse to present itself as the face of the democratic Islam. At the same time, through Davutoğlu’s “zero problems with neighbours” policy, it offered a collaborative vision of the regional order in which Turkey functioned as a mediator, including between Israel and Syria or Hamas. For the Saudis, the pressure of the War on Terror convinced then-Crown Prince Abdullah to launch the Arab Peace Initiative on 2002, which proposed a complete normalisation with Israel in exchange for a complete withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967. The proposal, which became the main paradigm of the Saudi approach to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, was meant to reaffirm the Kingdom’s role as a promoter of stability in the region as well as to improve its image in the West. In this context, Ahmadinejad’s discourse did not intend just to replace Khatami’s dialogue of civilisations but also to perform a rupture in the regional discourse to mobilise those among the regional audience who felt anger towards American unilateralism and frustration towards the Arab governments. In this way, the Iranian anti-imperialist principle, with its depiction of Ahmadinejad as an anti-imperialist hero and Iran as the legitimate representative of the awakening of oppressed people, emerged as a strategy for converting political into symbolic capital.

The deployment of this principle as a tool for accumulating both symbolic capital in the regional dimension and political capital in the national field is also demonstrated by the reaction following the 2009 elections. As a response to the accusations of fraud made by supporters of reformists Mousavi and Karroubi and by the subsequent wave of protests against the results of the elections, both Ahmadinejad and Khamenei framed the events as a part of a Western plot and accused the reformist movement of being a tool of imperialist power (Warnaar, 2013, pp. 153–167). This strategy, which aimed at rallying conservative segments of Iranian society behind the repression, demonstrated how anti-imperialism was being

17 The mediation between Israel and Syria failed following Israel’s military operation against Gaza in 2009, which favoured the emergence of Erdoğan’s confrontational rhetoric.
promoted as the main political currency in the field at the expense of the democratic credentials (favoured by the reformists). Thus, foreign policy discourses turned out to be an indispensable strategy for preserving both the orthodox interpretation of the Guardianship of the Jurist and the hierarchy of the field. This does not mean that the foreign policy discourse became “anti-democratic”. Rather, the requirement of democracy was subjected to the anti-imperialist mission. For example, in a speech held on Quds Day in 2009, Ahmadinejad defended the legitimacy of his re-election against Western criticism by tying the 2009 elections to the 2006 Palestinian elections. The point of the remark was not just to defend his democratic legitimacy but, above all, to boost ‘his legitimate credentials as the champion of “the Palestinian oppressed”’ (Holliday, 2020, p. 12). Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate, the loss of democratic credentials was revealed as a major issue for the Iranian political agents during the Arab Spring.

3.2 The Arab Spring and the Turkish–Iranian competition

The analysis offered in Section 3.1 provides the basis for understanding both Turkish and Iranian reactions to the Arab Spring. The core argument of this thesis is that the international standing of a political agent (expressed through foreign policy discourses) depends on its position in the national field. For the cases of Turkey and Iran, to mobilise political capital to compete in their respective national fields, the political agents developed principles of vision and division. These principles – namely the AKP’s democratic-religious principle and the Iranian conservative’s anti-imperialist principle – function both as strategies of accumulation of political capital and as discursive frameworks through which those agents seek to “promote” or “sell” their political products to other political fields in the Middle East political space. This international competition to impose the legitimate vision of the political order is key to understanding regional politics in the Arab Spring. During the regional upheaval, which paved the way for redefining principles of governance, the regional circulation of political ideas and foreign policy discourses had the potential to (re)set the boundaries of political fields amidst profound change. This process could have long-term effects on regional order, too, since the affirmation of a new principle of vision in the Middle East political space would have also led to a reformulation of the regional political discourse, including themes like the relationship between politics and religion and of the relations with the US and the West. In this sense, the

18 The 2006 elections held in the Palestinian territories saw the victory of Hamas against the secular Fatah. Although the process was found to be regular and transparent, the US, EU and Israel refused to recognise them.
competition between the Turkish model and the Iranian model is somewhat similar to the doxic battle described by Villumsen Berling (2012). In other words, regional politics during the Arab Spring took the form of a struggle over the definition of the legitimate political categories in the regional political space.

Before analysing the doxic battle for the Arab Spring, it is necessary to specify the ‘rules’ of the competition. First, in framing their response to the events, Turkish and Iranian (and, as I show in the next chapter, Saudi) political agents mobilised symbolic resources that belonged to their own experience in their respective national fields. The political agents struggled simultaneously over the symbolic domination of both regional politics and their respective national field. As such, in line with their relations with their competitors and with the social forces they represent, these agents frame their foreign policy discourses within the boundaries of their principle of vision and act as double agents. Moreover, the aim of the international struggle is to acquire enough symbolic capital to trigger the so-called ‘hegemonic field effect’, according to which a dominant field can impose its logic onto a dominated one (see Neumann and Nexon, 2018; McCourt, 2021). The mechanism by which this effect occurs is the emergence of homologies among agents both in the “powerful” field and in the “weaker” field. Accordingly, an agent in the weaker field identifies its struggle and position as homologous to an agent in the powerful field, consequently recognising the latter as a model to follow (and thus providing symbolic capital to this agent). In turn, the agent from the powerful field would use its position both at home and in the international realm to support its ‘little brother’ in the weaker field, in a similar way as the American political elites did for the centrist positions in the French political field after the Second World War (see McCourt, 2021). This section analyses the deployment of the AKP’s democratic-religious and the Iranian (neo)conservative anti-imperialist principles during the Arab Spring. It begins with the rise of the AKP as the most prestigious political agent in the regional political space. Then, it analyses the Iranian response to the events. The third section examines the relations between these two principles and the agents in the evolving post-revolutionary political fields in the region.

3.2.1 The AKP’s democratic-religious principle: A new understanding of the Turkish model discourse during the Arab Spring

The idea that Turkey’s political system could have been a model for the future democratic Middle East was not new to Turkish foreign policy. Even before the Arab Spring, Arab
intellectuals studied the AKP’s political experience, while the Arab masses showed a great appreciation for the pro-Palestinian stance of the Turkish government, even to the point of comparing Erdoğan to Nasser (Samaan, 2013). Therefore, the Turkish model discourse was already a source of accumulating prestige for the AKP. This was part of the democratic-religious principle, the strategy of accumulation of political capital adopted by the AKP in the national political field and of symbolic capital in the international political space. With the outbreak of the uprisings, the Turkish model discourse became an even more central theme in the AKP’s political message. Despite some initial hesitation, the AKP fully embraced the events of the Arab Spring and responded to the new regional processes through the democratic-religious principle. In this sense, Davutoğlu argues that Turkish foreign policy was based on the ‘[unconditional] support [of] the demands of the Arab people wherever they are, and whatever the content of their demands are, because it was their right to demand the best for themselves’ (Davutoğlu, 2012, p. 6). In the same article, the then-Minister of Foreign Affairs (later, Prime Minister) also argues that Turkey’s approach to the uprisings was solidly based on an ‘emphasis on democracy and popular legitimacy’ (ibid., p. 5). Furthermore, he connects the democratic processes started in the Arab world to Turkey’s political situation:

*The values demanded by the young Arab generation is [sic] the same as what our people enjoy and we believed that they had a right to claim them: free and fair elections, rule of law, transparency and accountability* (ibid.).

A similar theme can be found in the triumphal visits paid by Erdoğan to Tunisia and Egypt immediately after the fall of Ben Ali’s and Mubarak’s regimes, respectively. In both countries, the post-revolutionary developments were heading towards an empowerment of political parties associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, namely Tunisia’s Ennahda and Egypt’s Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). In particular, the latter’s position as an Islamist group that opposed a secularist and military dictatorship, and the most popular political movement in a key Arab state, made this political actor the ideal recipient for the promotion of the “AKP model”. Unsurprisingly, Erdoğan decided to deliver a speech to the movement’s leaders during his visit in Cairo on September 2011. In this speech, Erdoğan explicitly called for the new Egypt (and the Muslim Brotherhood) to adopt a secular constitution, specifying, however, that

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19 While the AKP was quick to support the uprising in Egypt, it initially did not take a clear stance on Libya and Syria, where Turkish companies had considerable interests. However, this hesitation did not last long, and the AKP supported both Libyan and Syrian rebels (see Öğuzlu, 2012; Taşpinar, 2012).
it ‘is not secularism in the Anglo-Saxon or Western sense; a person is not secular, the state is secular’ (quoted in Dal and Erşen, 2014, p. 271). This reference to secularism, which was criticised by the Egyptian audience, reflects the dispositions embodied by the AKP in the domestic struggle against the Kemalist establishment. As illustrated in Section 2.1, before challenging the “Kemalist principle”, the AKP had to accept the “rules of the game” (including secularism) to be recognised as a legitimate player in the political field. At the same time, it pushed the boundaries of these rules by opposing the strict Kemalist notion of secularism and promoting one that was more in line with the lifestyle of the AKP’s religious constituency. Therefore, the speech, which would have served to establish good ties with the emerging political elite in Egypt, was produced by dispositions developed within the national political struggle and thus directed (also) to a domestic audience.

This aspect underlines the concept of double agency associated with the production of foreign policy discourses. On the one hand, Erdoğan, in performing the speech, was acting as an agent in the national political field. As such, the performance had to reflect the history and dynamics of that field; therefore, the references used should be understood within the field’s logic. The reference to secularism signalled an attempt to make sense of the regional dynamics through the dispositions of the AKP’s habitus and, thus, to frame them through the democratic-religious principle (which is neither “Islamist” nor “anti-secular”). On the other hand, it is also crucial to grasp the regional dimension of the speech, its context and the position from which it was delivered. If we consider that Erdoğan delivered the speech from a position of force – precisely as the leader of the dominant political group in a powerful country and as a popular personality who had just received a triumphal welcome in Cairo – and if we consider the volatility of the post-Mubarak Egyptian political arena, we can appreciate the transformative potential of the performance. In relation to the changing situation of the Middle East, Erdoğan’s remarks, as well as Davutoğlu’s article and the many discourses linked to the so-called Turkish model, are also a manifestation of a group’s attempt to impose a dominant narrative on the ongoing process based on its peculiar political experience, in other words, ‘to universalize the particularisms of a single historical tradition’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999, p. 41). This is what was a stake in the symbolic struggle: the imposition of a field’s logic onto others.

This strategy necessitated forms of recognition within the Middle East political space. Recognition is a fundamental prerequisite for acquiring the symbolic capital necessary to exercise the power to reshape visions of political and, eventually, regional order. Considering their rise within their national political field, and the possible affinities with the AKP, it was
important that this recognition came from the political parties associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. In a certain sense, it can be argued that the AKP was in a position to obtain this recognition. The prestige that the AKP accumulated with its democratic credentials and economic performance has attracted increasing interest from scholars and Arab Islamist intellectuals. As Gerges argues, ‘the Turkish model, with the religiously observant provincial bourgeoisie as its king-pin and a pattern of linkage with the business classes and market liberalism, […] acts as a reminder that Islam and capitalism are mutually reinforcing and compatible’ (Gerges, 2013, p. 391; also quoted in Chamkhi, 2014, pp. 458–459). Moreover, the preservation of both NATO membership and good relations with the European Union has reinforced the AKP’s image as “moderate”, thus putting the party in a position to have its role as model for the emerging new democracies in the Middle East also recognised by the West. The recognition of Erdoğan’s party as a model soon also became a strategy for movements affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world to be considered as legitimate democratic political forces by the international community.

Rashid Ghannouchi, leader of the Tunisian Islamist party Ennahda, was more vocal in recognising the new position of the AKP. For instance, in his first interview after his return from exile, he rejected comparison with Osama bin Laden and Khomeini, assessing that his views were closer to Erdoğan’s model (France24, 2011). This point was further elaborated in another interview with Al-Jazeera, in which Ghannouchi affirmed that the Turkish experience was ‘the closest to the Tunisian situation, culturally, politically and socially’ and that the ‘closest comparison’ for Ennahda was ‘the AKP’ (Torun, 2016, p. 17 footnote 33). In another interview in October 2011, the leader of Ennahda unequivocally declared that Turkey was ‘a model country for us in terms of democracy’ (reported in Elshinnawi, 2013). The fact that this political agent needed to point to the AKP as a model to gain legitimacy within the international political space signalled a considerable accumulation of symbolic capital by the party. This was also fostered by political agents in the US, the global hegemon. For example, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton affirmed that it was ‘vital’ that Middle Eastern countries ‘learn the lessons that Turkey has learned and is putting into practice every single day’ (ibid.). Nevertheless, it would be an exaggeration to say that the prestige and recognition gained by the AKP was translated into an alignment of the Turkish and post-revolutionary political fields, or that the Muslim Brotherhood region-wide had incorporated the AKP’s democratic-religious principle in its habitus, thus establishing a relation of homology. As I explain in the next
section, the reception of the AKP’s discourse in the post-revolutionary fields is complex, especially in the Egyptian political field.

For the moment, however, the AKP succeeded in converting its accumulated symbolic capital at the regional level into further political capital in the national political field. In this case, the AKP found itself in a uniquely favourable position respect its competitors. With the delegitimisation of the political role of the military, the political opposition parties, especially the CHP and the ultra-nationalist Party of the Nationalist Movement (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP), were deprived of a powerful ally capable of mobilising the state meta-capital to preserve the Kemalist logic of the political field. In this situation, the main opposition party, the Kemalist CHP, contraproposed an orthodox nationalist-secularist principle to the AKP’s democratic-religious principle. This political message, based on the concept of ‘sovereignty’, represented the ‘growing fears and insecurities of the secular segments and middle classes for the future of the secular modernity’ (Keyman, 2010, p. 102). In line with this principle, the CHP strongly opposed the AKP’s democratic initiative on the Kurdish issue on the grounds that the peace process was a threat to the country’s territorial identity (Keyman, 2010) and also opposed the 2010 referendum. With the election of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu as CHP leader in 2010, the party tried to include democracy and human rights, alongside secularism, in its discourse, emphasising the necessity to reach ‘Western standards’ of ‘modern civilisation’ (Daily Sabah, 2011). Nevertheless, this “adjustment” was not enough to challenge the AKP’s successful claim of the monopoly on the themes of “democracy” and “promotion of democracy abroad” in the 2000s and during the initial phase of the Arab Spring. The circulation of the Turkish model discourse in the international and regional political space more clearly exemplified the powerful position, in terms of stocks of symbolic capital, of the religious-democratic principle respect of any other alternative visions of the political order in the Turkish political field. The outbreak of the Arab Spring and the popularity of Erdoğan in the region cornered the CHP. At the same time, the speeches delivered by the AKP officials were characterised by many references to foreign policy issues, which can be seen as a useful discursive tool for enhancing the party’s popularity in the domestic arena (see, for instance, Öniş 2011, p. 49; Pala and Aras, 2015; Özdamar, 2016, p. 102).

However, these discursive strategies also reveal a connection between the transformation of the Turkish political field according to the democratic-religious principle and the changing dynamics of the international political space. For instance, after his triumph in the June 2011 elections (in which the party obtained more than 49% of votes), Erdoğan declared:
Today, the Middle East, the Caucasus and the Balkans have won as much as Turkey. [...] We will become much more active in regional and global affairs. [...] We will take on a more effective role. We will call, as we have, for rights in our region, for justice, for the rule of law, for freedom and democracy (Gusten, 2011, as quoted by Pala and Aras, 2015, p. 290).

In other words, the AKP’s victory meant more justice, rule of law, freedom and democracy not just in Turkey but also in the region. In this way, by associating these two dimensions in the name of these values, this speech reveals the double game of the AKP’s discourse, in which the accumulation of political capital at home (the electoral victories and democratic legitimacy) is connected to the accumulation of symbolic capital in the region (in the sense of the ability to transform the regional political space according to these values, which was an endeavour connected to the exercise of symbolic power). Until 2013, the double game seemed to be well-conducted by the AKP. The democratic legitimacy resulting from the electoral victories marked the definitive rise of the AKP as a dominant group in the political field, thus fostering the party’s claim of the monopoly over representing the Turkish model abroad. This allowed the AKP to place itself, through its democratic-religious principle, in a powerful position in the doxic battle for the redefinition of Middle East politics.

3.2.2 The Iranian political field in the doxic battle

The AKP’s accumulation of symbolic capital corresponded with a considerable loss of prestige of the so-called Iranian model, or anti-imperialist principle of vision. This may seem, in a way, paradoxical. Since the Iranian political system bases its legitimacy (internal and external) on its “revolutionary” and “popular” character, Iranian players could be expected to be in an optimal position to redefine the rules of the game in the Middle East. In other words, having been socialised in a political field that rewards religious and anti-Western discourses, and having built a regional discourse based on resistance against American imperialism and Zionism, the habitus of the Iranian political groups should have adapted to circumstances that saw conservative and pro-Western secular regimes being overthrown and then replaced by parties of religious inspiration. However, this was not exactly the case, and not just for Tehran’s support for the Baathist regime in Syria.
At the beginning of the Arab Spring, the Iranian conservative coalition supported the popular uprising, thus reproducing the anti-imperialist principle of vision that characterised this coalition’s position in the national political field. In doing so, the coalition (which included “traditional” and neoconservatives from Khamenei to Ahmadinejad) framed the events as an “Islamic Awakening”. The use of the term ‘awakening’ is not casual. Rather, it is derived from the speeches of Ayatollah Khomeini, who defined ‘awakening’ both in a spiritual and a political sense:

Men of wisdom – since you are students of theology; I should speak in your language – say the first station for a spiritual wayfarer is ‘awakening’. Khwajah Abdullah Ansari resorts to this noble verse as an example in his book ‘Manazil as-Sairin’, citing the notion of awakening as the first step. His interpretation of the former verse is that you should wake up because awakening is a kind of ‘uprising’. All the revolutions taking place in the world is [sic] a kind of uprising, uprising from negligence and uprising after awakening (Khomeini, 1979b, p. 172; emphasis in the original).

Supreme Leader Khamenei, who warmly welcomed the uprising by using this term (Chubin, 2012, pp. 16–17), was clear about the origins of this interpretation. On more than one occasion he affirmed that Khomeini was the ‘father’ of the Islamic Awakening and the leader under whose auspices the Iranian ‘hegemony-free model of progress’ was developed (The Office of the Supreme Leader, 2012). On another occasion, he stated the regional events were ‘inspired by the Iranian Islamic Revolution’ (Khamenei, 2011, as quoted by Abu Hilal, 2011, p. 1). In doing so, Khamenei dictated the line for other Iranian and pro-Iranian actors. Accordingly, President Ahmadinejad and Speaker of the Parliament Larijani used a similar language around the protests. The former also affirmed that ‘developments in the region indicate the demise of arrogant powers’ (Ahmadinejad, 2011, as reported by Abu Hilal, 2011, p. 2, Footnote 3). Similarly, other agents of the Axis of Resistance echoed this rhetoric. In a speech delivered after the fall of Ben Ali, Hezbollah’s leader Nasrallah added that the Tunisian uprising was ‘a lesson to all those who depend on the United States and Israel’ (Khoury, 2013, p. 82). Between January and February 2012, Iranian officials organised an international conference on ‘Islamic Awakening’ (see Tehran Times, 2011), in which a screen displaying images of the 1979 Revolution blended into footage of 2011 Arab protesters (Worth, 2012). In this way, the Iranian model, with its language and political categories, was presented as the natural path for the Arab Spring.
This approach can be understood as the outcome of two processes. On the one hand, these discourses reproduced the logic of production of political goods in the Iranian national field. In other words, a field characterised by an Islamic revolutionary and anti-American doxa produced in Iranian agents a habitus that was inclined to respond to the Arab Spring by generating revolutionary and anti-American foreign policy discourses. This reproduction occurred despite the uncomfortable similarities between the uprisings in the Arab countries and the protests against the alleged irregularities in the controversial 2009 Iranian presidential elections. These similarities were underscored by the leaders of the Iranian Green Movement. Mir Mousavi, for example, said that the Iranian protests were the ‘starting point’ of the Arab Spring (see Kurzman, 2012, p. 162). However, it would be also fair to stress that, by riding the wave of the Arab Spring, the Supreme Leader and the dominant conservative group adopted a strategy aiming at consolidating, after a considerable crisis, the legitimacy of their dominance, both within and outside the field. On the other hand, this strategy should also be interpreted in the light of the symbolic struggle to determine the “new Middle East”, thus as an attempt to promote the Iranian brand of political capital.

In addressing the revolts, the Iranian political agents were trying to impose their anti-imperialist principle of vision that had been developed in their nationally situated political struggle onto the changing political fields and to the regional political space. This does not mean that Khamenei and Ahmadinejad were trying to promote a strict application of the Guardianship of the Jurist. They certainly supported politicising religious symbols in other political fields, that is, the acquisition by those agents seeking to subvert the authoritarian order in their countries of the means of production of religious goods, in line with the Iranian revolutionary tradition. For instance, Abu Hilal notes how Khamenei ‘encouraged Egyptian clerics to use the mosques to “echo the chants of the protesters in the streets”’ (Abu Hilal, 2011, p.2). However, the Iranian model failed to attract much sympathy in the Middle East political space. Ghannouchi’s above-mentioned rejection of any comparison with Khomeini is an example of this lack of recognition. This statement was the outcome of an intricate intellectual journey, which led Ghannouchi to denounce the shortcomings of the Iranian model already in the 1980s. In an article written in 1984, Ghannouchi criticised the Iranians both ‘for portraying themselves as if they were the possessors of absolute truth, […] as if their revolution was the only legitimate

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20 “Revolutionary” does not mean that the political agents constantly call for revolution. Rather, it means that the references to the Islamic Revolution, whether in the form of claiming “revolutionary credentials” in virtue of a past participation to the 1979 events or in a form of rhetoricical attachment to the values and the “universal mission” of the Islamic Revolution, are an important aspect through which Iranian politicians declare their belonging to the field.
method of change’ and for their ‘extreme oversimplification of international relations’, as exemplified by their anti-American rhetoric (Tamimi, 2001, p. 64). On its part, the Muslim Brotherhood was more preoccupied with constructing a discourse that appealed both to the Egyptian universe of political discourse and to the Western-dominated international market of political ideas. Even in 2007, a member of the group, Magdy Ashour, stated: ‘We would like to change the idea people have of us in the West. […] We do not want a country like Iran, which thinks that it is ruling with a divine mandate’ (quoted in Hamid and Grewal, 2019).

It would be too simple to assert that the insistence on seeing a parallel between the Arab Spring and the Iranian Revolution was the fruit of a delusion regarding the regional upheaval. Rather, to have a clear understating of the Iranian response, it is necessary to consider Bourdieu’s concept of hysteresis. Political agents develop their response to the flow of events through their habitus. As Swartz notes, ‘Habitus implies that actors attend to the present and anticipate the future in terms of previous experience’ (Swartz, 1997, p. 112). However, the logic of producing the practices of an agent’s habitus is not always aligned with the logic of the field, thus ending with the production of practices that are seen as awkward and out of tune by other agents (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 109, 1990, p. 62). As noted in Section 1.3.1, Bourdieu calls this misalignment hysteresis. In this case, Iranian agents interacted with the political processes triggered by the revolutions as if they were part of the uprising of ‘all Islamic nations and the oppressed peoples of the world’ that Khomeini had hoped for (Khomeini, 1983, p. 407), which would have seen ‘the government of the Islamic Republic and the crusading people of Iran as an ideal example’ (ibid, p. 417). However, as I argue in greater detail in the following section, the social and political conditions in these countries and in the region were quite different. The difficulties of the Iranian agents’ habitus to adapt to the dynamics of post-revolutionary fields in the Middle East were evident in two aspects of the Iranian discourse: the insistence on categorising the revolutions as essentially anti-American and the subsequent collocation of the Iran-led resistance axis within the “ranks” of the regional revolution.

The rejection of the external influence of the US and other “arrogant powers” was undoubtedly a crucial aspect of the Iranian revolutionary experience, as well as the dominant conservative group’s strategy of reproduction, which I have named the anti-imperialist principle. Therefore, it was almost “natural” for Khamenei and the Ahmadinejad government to deploy an anti-American discourse to mobilise support both in the national political field and in the regional political space. Despite the fact that some of the autocrats overthrown by the revolutions were well-known American allies (such as Mubarak, Tunisia’s Ben Ali or Yemen’s Saleh), anti-
Western sentiments did not have the same central role in the Arab Spring. As noted by Hinnebusch, among others, the uprisings marked a ‘shift away from the resistance-axis narrative’ in the regional discourse by focusing on ‘democracy and freedom’ rather than on ‘anti-imperialist, or anti-Zionist concerns’ (Hinnebusch, 2014, p.69). The liberal Morcef Marzouki, the first President of Tunisia in the post-Ben Ali era, expressed this state of affairs: ‘The Arab revolutions have not turned anti-Western. Nor are they pro-Western. They are simply not about the West. They remain fundamentally about social justice and democracy’ (Marzouki, 2011, as quoted by Khoury, 2013, p. 80). The discourses of the parties affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood (which I analyse in greater detail in the following section) showed a similar orientation. Furthermore, it seems that the priority of this group was rather to be recognised by the West as a legitimate political player at the international level to spend this recognition in the national political field, just as the AKP did. Moreover, the Iranian approach to the Syrian crisis, which I analyse in Chapter 4, created a sentiment of hostility towards the Iranian regime, which became a de facto reactionary force. Hence, neither an endorsement of the Iranian model nor a pro-Iranian foreign policy turn were likely in 2011–2012, thus leading to the dismissal of the Iranian claim to be the main ideological force behind the revolutions.

To summarise, the drivers of Turkish and Iranian foreign policy behaviours were the strategies of accumulation within their respective national political fields. In the Turkish case, supporting the Arab Spring suited the AKP’s strategy based on democratic reformism and an emphasis on conservative values. In the Iranian case, the regime and the conservative government, which were the positions that had the interest in preserving an orthodox configuration of the universe of political discourse, responded according to their “revolutionary” and anti-imperialist dispositions and to their interests in the field. In this initial phase of the struggle, the AKP’s democratic-religious principle of vision received greater recognition from the new rising political groups in the region, thus opening the perspective of aligning the AKP-dominated Turkish political field and the post-revolutionary fields. This initial success led to the AKP’s accumulation of symbolic capital, which helped to consolidate its political domination over the national field. On the contrary, the Iranian anti-imperialist principle failed to mobilise significant support throughout the region. As the political groups that emerged after the revolutions tried to gain recognition from the West, thus assuring a smooth transition, they formulated their discourses in such a way to construct a form of political capital based on “democratic credentials” rather than on anti-imperialist ones. However, because the logic of
the Iranian conservatives’ habitus led this group to misrecognise the changes in the regional discourse, they were de facto supporting political positions that had much more in common with their reformist competitors in the Iranian political field. Hence, we can define the approach of Khamenei and Ahmadinejad’s government as hysteresis of the habitus, a situation that became even more complex with the Syrian uprising. It seems, therefore, that the Turkish political field was in a better position to redefine the post-Arab Spring regional discourse, which explains the AKP’s eagerness to maintain this regional posture. Nevertheless, to grasp this aspect, it is necessary to look at the relations between the political fields of Turkey and Iran and those of the post-revolutionary states, which I analyse in the following section.

3.3 Turkish–Iranian competition and the evolution of post-revolutionary political fields

The evolution of the political fields in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco\textsuperscript{21,22} was characterised by the rise of Islamist groups linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. This development can be explained by different factors. Among these is surely the decline of Arab nationalism, which was one of the pillars of the ideology that supported the Ancien Régime (see Hinnebusch, 2014, p.69). On the contrary, years of opposition have granted the Muslim Brotherhood and its associates great prestige and credibility in the eyes of the new Arab voters in the elections held in the aftermath of the fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt. On this occasion, ‘[a] vote for Islamists implied a clear break with the failed past and a belief (to be tested) that they could deliver the good-jobs, economic stability, transparency, and inclusiveness’ (Gerges, 2013, p. 390; see also Chamkhi, 2014, p. 453). This development was favoured by substantial changes in the social representation of these movements. In the past three decades, many Islamist movements in the Arab world experienced the emergence within their ranks of a new generation composed of middle-class professionals (lawyer, doctors, businesspersons, etc.) and an emerging socially conservative bourgeoisie. This new generation pushed for a more “integrationist” political message (with mixed success, according to the various national situations) (see Gerges, 2013, pp. 391–396). In other words, these Islamist forces reshape their

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\textsuperscript{21}In the case of Morocco, the protests led to constitutional reform that established a sort of constitutional monarchy, although the monarch still preserved certain powers, including control of the defence and foreign policies.
\textsuperscript{22}In this section, other countries affected by the Arab Spring are not mentioned since in these cases the uprising did not result in regime change (for instance, Bahrain and Syria) or, after the collapse of the regime, the political situation degenerated into a state-failure scenario (Libya and Yemen).
\end{footnotesize}
political practices according to the conditions of both the global economic and their national political fields, in a similar vein as the AKP. There are two clear examples of this.

The first example is the trajectory of the Muslim Brotherhood’s economic agenda, especially in Egypt. Although the movement was never openly against the free market and private property, it nevertheless criticised the Mubarak regime’s concessions to the International Monetary Fund and the subsequent programme of privatisation by accusing the government of ‘selling Egypt and its wealth’ (Gamal, 2019, p. 4). However, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the FJP (the political party founded by the Muslim Brotherhood) quickly adopted an economic approach similar to that of the overthrown regime and established ties with the business community to present itself as a pro-economic-liberalisation player in the new political system. As Wael Gamal notes, ‘Morsi was the most economically liberal of the candidates in the presidential election’, since his political agenda (the ‘Renaissance Project’) ‘called for resuming privatization – even of strategic economic sectors – after it had been stopped in 2007’ (ibid.). Similar trajectories have characterised the approach of other parties in the region, such as Tunisia’s Ennahda and Morocco’s Justice and Development Party (Parti de la justice et du développement, PJD), which, although with some differences due to the different national context, all pursue policies within the parameters of neoliberal governance (Saif and Rumman, 2012; Ülgen et al., 2012, p. 5; Cimini, 2017). This does not mean that these political movements advocate continuity with the previous regimes’ economic policies. On the contrary, they stress the necessity of reforms, especially focusing on certain demands of the demonstrators, such as the fight against corruption and pursuing social justice.

The second example is the greater importance given to democracy in the political discourse of Islamist parties. A major political development in the aftermath of the Arab Spring is the acceptance of democratic and majoritarian mechanisms by the Muslim Brotherhood’s affiliate movements (Ülgen et al., 2012, p. 4). As Tudoroiu notes, the confrontation with authoritarian regimes’ repression led these parties to place ‘parliamentary democracy, full political freedoms and the end to all exceptional laws’ at the centre of their political discourse (2011, p. 384). To be fair, certain political movements, such as Ennahda, already accepted democracy as the major political tool to fight the political status quo (Chamkhi, 2014, p. 461); this position favoured the integration of the party in the post-revolution Tunisian political system. The emphasis on democracy also means a shift in the priorities of the parties’ political message from Islamisation of society and the adoption of sharia to the strengthening of democratic mechanisms. For instance, issues like the relationship between the executive and legislative
powers and the civilian control over the military dominated the political debate in Egypt and other countries (Ülgen et al., 2012, p. 4). At the same time, the FJP did not openly advocate for the creation of an Islamic state, supporting instead the creation of a ‘civil (that is, secular) state’ (ibid., p. 9, see also Tudoroiu, 2011, pp. 384-385; and Chamkhi, 2014, p. 457). In the same vein, Tunisia’s Ennahda refused to insert a provision in the post-Ben Ali constitution that would declare Islamic law as the main source of legislation (reference to be added). Therefore, in the immediate aftermath of the revolutions, Islamist political parties around the region gradually accepted their national rules of the game, thus reshaping their political discourse and practice to incorporate new definitions of state and citizenship (Chamkhi, 2014, p. 462).

What does this mean for regional politics? It can be argued that these developments in the post-revolutionary political fields created the conditions for a possible alignment with the Turkish political field. Considering the AKP’s standing in relation to the emerging Islamist parties in the region, it is interesting to note the similarities of these parties’ trajectories in their national political field and the Turkish Islamic movement. In this case, as illustrated in Section 2.1.2, the 1997 political crisis resulted in the failure of the coalition government led by Necmettin Erbakan (which ended when the military forced his resignation with the “28 February memorandum”) and by the subsequent ban of the movement’s political party (the RP), which led to the split of the movement. Thus, the “reformist faction” of the movement, which aimed to represent the interests of a rising religious provincial bourgeoisie, founded the AKP in the early 2000s. Since its foundation, the party adopted an integrationist strategy (see Akdeniz and Göker, 2011), hence stressing its loyalty to the core values of the Republic (see Atacan, 2005, p. 19), rejecting the “Islamist” label (instead preferring to be called “conservative”) and reshaping its political message around the enhancement of democratic mechanisms (see Atikcan and Oge, 2012) while delivering neoliberal measures to satisfy the interests of their allies in the economic field.

After its first electoral victory in 2002, the AKP became the vehicle for a doxic change within Turkey’s political field, with a successful strategy of subversion that favoured the rise of the party’s social group of reference (the religious bourgeoisie) to the detriment of the old secular establishment supported by the military. These changes in domestic power relations led to a change in foreign policy discourses in line with the change in the encompassing production of political discourses. This change did not just allow the AKP to be perceived as a positive example for democratic movements in the Middle East but also for it to project a good image
of itself in the West, where the Turkish model became a theme in the American academic field (it became especially a tool against the clash of civilisation discourse) (compare with Oktem and Benhaim, 2015), as well as in the foreign policy discourses (as seen with the example of Hilary Clinton). Thus, as in the cases of the parties affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood in the political fields subjected to the Arab Spring, the AKP constructed a strategy of accumulation of political capital based on neoliberalism, democratic reformism and a foreign policy discourse framework that sought recognition from the West.

Thus, it can be argued, by using a constructivist vocabulary, that the AKP and the Muslim Brotherhood shared the same “social identity” and that this would have explained the former’s support for the rise to power of the latter and the good relations between Turkey and post-revolutionary Tunisia and Egypt. However, this tells us just a part of the story. To grasp two important aspects of the Turkish engagement with the Arab Spring, it is important to take a look at the issue of power relations as well as the internal conditions in Tunisia and Egypt. In the first case, as Bourdieu tells us, the circulation of ideas is influenced by power relations between different agents and different fields, thus becoming a means for imposing categories belonging to other historical traditions (as demonstrated by Erdoğan’s Cairo speech). This can be seen in how the AKP and Erdoğan addressed the Arab audiences. The attempt to impose the democratic-religious principle was built through a previous accumulation of symbolic capital. This accumulation is evident in certain aspects of the AKP’s engagement in the region. First, there is Erdoğan’s triumphal welcome in Arab capitals (something that was not seen in the case of Ghannouchi or Morsi in Ankara or Istanbul), which signalled the prestige of the AKP’s leader. Second, there were the references to Turkey made by party leaders, as in Ghannouchi’s statements, that indicated an act of symbolic appropriation, in which the AKP’s symbolic capital is appropriated by, or put at the disposal of, Ennahda for the sake of the latter’s bid for recognition both internally and internationally. This act of appropriation highlighted the AKP’s “stock” of symbolic capital in the region in relation to its Arab counterparts.

A possible counterargument may rely on the Muslim Brotherhood’s alleged reluctance to fully embrace all aspects of the so-called Turkish model and of the AKP experience. Particularly, the issue of secularism was difficult to accept for Islamist groups. Even Tunisia’s Ennahda, which was more vocal in its admiration of the Turkish experience, and, similarly to the AKP, had acted in a field characterised by a ‘relatively rigid French form of secularism’ (Marks, 2017, p. 112), held distance from the concept. Ghannouchi himself, while appreciating that
Turkey had the closest experience to Tunisia, affirmed that Tunisia did not need secularism (Yezdani, 2011). Afterwards, Ennahda pushed for the adoption of the term “civil state”, intended as a mediation between secularism and an Islamic state, in the constitution. In the case of the Egyptian FJP, the scepticism towards “Turkish secularism” was expressed in the strongest terms. After Erdoğan’s famous speech in Cairo, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood took distance and stated that the while ‘Turkey’s conditions imposed on it to deal with the secular concept’, this was not the case with Egypt (Al Arabiya, 2011). The FJP’s point of view should be understood in light of the conditions of Egypt’s political field. The relative strength of the Salafi movement, both as a social force and, through the Noor Party, as a political agent, constrained the ideological options for the FJP in terms of adopting the concept of secularism (Gumuscu, 2010; Stein, 2021, pp. 188–189). Moreover, before the Arab Spring, the Brotherhood used to see the AKP model as a possible ideological rival, able to attract the Egyptian religious youth, and defined the AKP’s political practice as a form of ‘impaired Islam’ (Ayyash, 2020). Similarly, the Moroccan PJD also did not accept the use of the concept in their case, citing in particular the Islamic character of Morocco as enshrined in the constitution whereby the King is legitimised through religious terms (‘the commander of the faithful’) and Islam is declared the official state religion (Perekli, 2012, pp. 87–90).

However, the rejection of one aspect of the AKP’s political experience does not necessarily mean that these parties rejected the democratic-religious principle. Drawing upon Bourdieu’s works, it can be argued that the function or value of a certain political discourse depends in equal proportion on the field of origin and on the field of reception. The process of transferring political ideas and discourses from one field to another implies an operation of de-contextualisation that includes a process of selection and classification to readapt the discourse to the conditions of the field of reception and deploy it to enhance the position of the ‘importer’ (compare Bourdieu, 1999, p. 222). Thus, the AKP’s political discourse experienced a similar process of selecting and re-categorising contents. In that case, the concept of secularity of state was dropped, while the aspect of compatibility between Islamic religiosity and democratic practices was fully adopted. The function of the Turkish model for the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated parties was to legitimise their role as part of the democratisation process, an aspect that opened up important opportunities for the AKP to impose, even in a “diluted form”, its democratic-religious principle and to reshape the post-Arab Spring regional order.

For instance, the PJD, although sceptical of the concept of secularism, widely discussed the Turkish example and pledged to learn the lessons the AKP taught in terms of its capacity as
an Islamic party able to integrate into the political game and to enhance democracy and human rights within the system. Accordingly, since the end of the 2000s, the PJD has changed its political discourse by ending its previous call for the implementation of sharia and introducing democracy, human rights and rule of law to its political vocabulary (Perekli, 2012). At the same time, Ghannouchi, as mentioned above, defined Turkey as a model ‘in terms of democracy’ (Elshinnawi, 2013). As far as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the FJP are concerned, since the revolution, they stopped considering the AKP as an ideological threat and started to align their political discourse with their Turkish counterpart. For instance, during and after the 2012 presidential campaign, “[t]he movement kept highlighting the political and doctrinal similarities with Erdoğan’ (Ayyash, 2020). Moreover, AKP electoral advisers worked for the FJP and Morsi during the elections to help them reshape their political message (Perekli, 2012, p. 86; Ayidin-Duzgit, 2014). After his election to the presidency, Mohammad Morsi accepted an invitation to speak at the AKP’s Convention, where he praised Turkey by describing it ‘a source of inspiration for the whole Middle East’ (Khoury, 2013, p. 78). This provides an interesting picture of the so-called Turkish model in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. These mentions to the AKP’s experience in this field, as well as the selective borrowing of its discourse, demonstrated the success of the democratic-religious principle in this phase of the Arab Spring. In a certain sense, this is an example of what Dezalay and Garth (2002, p. 7) call ‘international strategies’, that is, the use of foreign capital, such as ‘resources, degrees, contacts, legitimacy [as in the case of the prestige of the AKP as an example of a democratic and religious party], and expertises [as in the case of the FJP’s consultation with Turkish experts]’, to enhance its position in the national field. As a result of these dynamics, the AKP’s stock of symbolic capital increased in the initial phase of the Arab Spring, thus encouraging the party to direct the country’s foreign policy towards the full support for democratic change in the Middle East.

In Iran, prominent scholars were already aware that the social forces of the Arab Spring and the political Islam professed by the emerging Arab political elites were ‘more inclined to the Turkish than the Iranian model’ (Zibakalam, 2012, as quoted in Chubin, 2012, p. 17). At the same time, the repression of the Iranian Green Movement in 2009 (and, later, the support for Bashar al-Assad), deteriorated the image of the “resistance model”, which seemed inadequate to provide political representation to the new demands of the Arab street. In response to the rising status of the AKP in the Middle East political space, Iranian officials tried to attack Erdoğan’s approach to the Arab Spring. For instance, after the famous September 2011 tour
in the post-revolutionary Arab countries, in which Erdoğan encouraged the Muslim Brotherhood to accept secular constitutions, Ali Akbar Velayati, senior adviser of the Islamic Republic’s Supreme Guide, tried to exploit this perceived “misstep”. He argued that Erdoğan’s appeal to ‘secular Islam’ was inappropriate for the ‘Islamic Awakening’, and that it was essentially ‘a version of Western liberal democracy’ (Barkey, 2012, p. 154). In this way, the Iranian regime tried to open a common discursive space with those political parties, such as the FJP, that criticised Erdoğan’s reference to secularism. However, this accusation did not have any impact on the prestige of the then-Turkish Prime Minister nor on the attractiveness of the democratic-religious principle. At the same time, the Iranian resistance-based model was not particularly discussed within the Middle East political space, at least not as a strategy to gain recognition or accumulate political and symbolic capital. As demonstrated above, most of the interventions made by Islamist political parties – the potential importers of the Iranian anti-imperialist principle – regarding the Iranian model were aimed at distancing themselves from that experience (as in the case of Ghannouchi; see Section 3.2.2). In certain cases, secularist agents used the “Iranian ghost” to delegitimise their Islamist competitors. For instance, the former vice-president of the Egyptian Court of Cassation, accordingly a member of the establishment of the Ancien Régime, accused the Muslim Brotherhood of ‘planning to study and implement the Iranian model of religion–state relations’ in Egypt (Khatib and Ghanem, 2018, p. 242).

Although the Iranian conservative coalition attempted to “sell” its anti-imperialist vision of political order, this failed to find any receptive audience in the fields of reception, thus making the Iranian foreign policy discourse an example of quixotic practices. In this sense, it seemed that anti-Western and anti-imperialist discourses had lost much of their symbolic value in the immediate post-Arab Spring political space of the Middle East. The only aspect of this discourse that had the potential for trans-regional political mobilisation was the Palestinian cause. In this area, the Iranian regime could count on strong pro-Palestinian credentials, as well as on the inclusion of Hamas, part of the Muslim Brotherhood’s regional “family”, into the Axis of Resistance. However, this aspect of the Iranian discourse was also eclipsed by three developments. First, as previously illustrated, Erdoğan was able to construct the AKP’s own pro-Palestinian discourse, which attracted a consistent appreciation in the region. Second, the AKP and Hamas were developing strong relations. Already in 2006 a delegation of the Palestinian movement was welcomed in Turkey (Al-Jazeera, 2006). Moreover, one of Hamas’s leader was invited to the 2012 AKP party congress. On this occasion, he remarked
that the AKP showed the “bright face” of Islam and, turning to the then-Turkish Prime Minister, he added: ‘Erdoğan, you are not only a leader in Turkey now, you are a leader in the Muslim world as well’ (reported in BBC News, 2012; and in Burch, 2012). Finally, in the wake of the Syrian civil war, and Hamas support for the “Syrian brothers”, the ties between the Palestinian movement and Tehran worsened significantly. This showed how the AKP was successful in challenging the Iranian monopoly on the Palestinian (and anti-Zionist) cause without adopting Ahmadinejad’s radical anti-imperialist rhetoric, which was losing its capacity to mobilise the regional audience.

If the insistence on the anti-imperialist character of the Arab Spring was inconsistent, the support for Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria has unveiled all the contradictions of the Iranian approach to the uprisings. The Iranian narrative of the events intended to categorise the Arab Spring within the framework of the anti-imperialist principle of vision. According to this discourse, the struggle against oppressive governments at home goes hand in hand with the anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist struggle in the region (through the Axis of Resistance). Accordingly, actors who adopted these stances were thought to be in line with popular will and therefore immune from political contestations. In fact, Bashar al-Assad’s refusal to engage with Israel diplomatically was considered by some analysts as one of the reasons for the alleged stability of the Syrian Baathist regime (see Wikstrom, 2011). The beginning of protests in Syria and the government’s subsequent crackdown that led to the civil war exposed all the fallacies of this perspective. Erdoğan was also surprised by the developments in Damascus. The improvement of Turkish–Syrian ties used to be the flagship of the AKP’s zero problems with neighbours approach. However, Erdoğan broke relations with the Assad regime and sided with the opposition, calling for a regime change. This choice reflected the dispositions adopted by the AKP during the Arab Spring, which preferred a strategy aimed at accumulating certain symbolic resources like democratic credentials and support for democratisation against authoritarianism rather than, in this case, economic ones23.

The Iranian actors followed a more ambiguous and awkward approach. Although the Iranian regime finally decided to support the Syrian regime and defend its position as the leader of the Axis of Resistance, at the beginning of the uprising it was trying to exploit the possible opportunities opened by the regime changes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. In doing so, without

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23 In breaking ties with Damascus, the Turkish government sacrificed a trade deal with Syria, with a significant economic loss for the Turkish companies involved.
jeopardising Assad, Iranians tried to oppose the categorisation of the Syrian uprising as part of the Arab Spring. For instance, during the 2012 conference on the “Islamic awakening” held in Tehran, the situation in Syria was effectively not addressed (Worth, 2012). At the beginning of the crisis, Ahmadinejad, who represented the only position within the conservative coalition with democratic credentials (even though they were jeopardised by the 2009 elections), tried to encourage Assad to engage with the opposition and implement some reforms (MacFarquhar, 2011), thus differentiating himself from Khamenei (an aspect that I discuss in Section 5.2.1). However, under the guidance of the Supreme Leader and the security apparatus, the Iranian regime opted to support Damascus. In doing so, they framed the Syrian uprising according the anti-imperialist principle of vision, labelling the Syrian rebellion as a plot of the West (Fürtig, 2013, p. 15). This act demonstrated that Iranian conservatives were clear in affirming that anti-imperialist credentials were a form of political capital more important than democratic ones.

In 2012, for instance, Khamenei proclaimed: ‘Iran supports the Syrian regime because Syria is a crucial component of the “axis of resistance” against Israel. Iran is against any kind of interference in Syria by [W]estern forces’ (quoted in Akbarzadeh and Conduit, 2016, p. 136). Ahmadinejad eventually echoed similar sentiments (ibid.).

The inconsistency of this approach clearly demonstrated the lag of the Iranian regime’s habitus with respect to the conditions of most of the political fields in the Middle East political space. The attempt to separate the Syrian case from the Arab Spring and to emphasise anti-imperialism and a commitment to the anti-Zionist struggle as more important forms of political legitimation were rejected by emerging Islamist agents in other political fields in the region. Mohammed Morsi’s visit to Tehran for the Non-Aligned Movement summit in August 2012 (the first visit of an Egyptian president after the 1979 Revolution) was an example of that. On that occasion, Morsi expressed his solidarity with ‘the struggle of the Syrian people against an oppressive regime’, stressing that supporting the Syrian protesters was ‘an ethical duty as it is a political and strategic necessity’ (reported in Al-Jazeera, 2012). In response to the intervention, the delegation of the Syrian government walked out of the room, thus embarrassing the Iranians (ibid.). Overall, the ambiguity and confusion of the Iranian position and the final decision to support Bashar al-Assad exposed the Iranian conservatives to the charge of hypocrisy. Moreover, the unconditional support for Damascus damaged the reputation of the Axis of Resistance as a whole, including the Lebanese Hezbollah, which lost its ‘revolutionary purity’ (Khoury, 2013, p. 82) and therefore part of the symbolic capital it
had previously accumulated with the past confrontations against Israel. This was another considerable damage to the prestige of the Iranian anti-imperialist principle.

3.4 Conclusions

The aim of the chapter was to offer a field-theoretically informed analysis of the Turkish–Iranian competition in the initial phase of the Arab Spring. In the first section, the chapter offered an overview of the relations between internal power struggles in Turkey and Iran and the changing Middle East political landscape in the pre-Arab Spring period. In adopting Bourdieu’s field theory and its concept of political field, I demonstrated how foreign policy discourses are part of strategies that aim at accumulating political capital at home. This stock of domestic political capital can then be converted into external prestige, or symbolic capital, to be spent in the region, as well as to be reconverted into political capital in the national political field, thus creating a sort of virtuous circle. Following this approach, I reframed the model discourses of Turkey and Iran as the democratic-religious principle and anti-imperialist principles, respectively. The first refers to the principle of vision elaborated by the AKP, the second to the Iranian conservatives’ strategy of reproduction.

In the second section, the chapter illustrated the foreign policy discourse adopted by these two political agents in response to the Arab Spring. I demonstrated how these reproduced the principle of vision and division elaborated in their national political fields. In the Iranian case, despite the little relevance of anti-American and anti-Zionist themes during the uprisings, the Iranian conservatives insisted on their anti-imperialist principle. In analysing the competition between these two principles of vision of the political order, I deployed the concept of doxic battle, which denotes the period of uncertainty experienced by different political fields in the Middle East. In this situation, the battle was over the imposition of the legitimate principle of domination, that is, the legitimate forms of political capital and political discourse. In this competition, the AKP’s appeal to democracy demonstrated the use of foreign policy discourses to promote its political capital and its strategy of reproduction to the emerging Islamist political parties in the Arab political fields that experienced the uprisings. The Iranian conservatives did the same by promoting anti-imperialist credentials over democratic ones as a form of political capital. In the third section, the chapter analysed this competition in light of the developments of the Arab political fields in the initial phase after the uprisings (2011-2013).
Overall, by demonstrating how the responses of the AKP and the Iranian conservatives were “filtered” by the practical necessities in their respective national political fields, this chapter supports one of the theoretical claims of this thesis, namely, that foreign policy discourses are not just negotiated in the political field but are also part of the agents’ strategies of accumulation of political capital, thus emphasising how the international position of an agent depends on its position in the national field. Moreover, the Bourdieu-inspired conceptualisation of the Middle East regional politics as a space of political fields in which political discourses circulate and are promoted presents an important insight into understanding Turkish and Iranian foreign policies during the Arab Spring as well as regional politics. The success of the AKP’s democratic-religious principle is explained through the symbolic value of this discourse, which granted a form of legitimation, both external and internal, to the Islamist parties. In grasping this aspect, it is important to consider the dynamic of the circulation of political discourses in the international space, which sees operations of de-contextualisation, selection and re-adaptation in the field of reception. In this way, Arab Islamist parties were able to take the aspects of the AKP’s political discourse that were more useful for their national political fields. This therefore created the potential for establishing homologous strategies with Erdoğan’s party, as well as the beginning of an alignment between their fields and the Turkish one. This has enhanced the value of the AKP’s political capital and of its stock of political capital. In contrast, the Iranian’s strategy of accumulation based on anti-imperialist credentials failed to match the conditions of those political agents seeking internal and external democratic legitimation. Ultimately, its attempt to label the Arab Spring as an Islamic Awakening inspired by the 1979 Revolution was rebuffed, especially considering the Iranian support for the Assad regime in Syria.

In conclusion, Turkey and Iranian foreign policies during the Arab Spring have been explained through a Bourdieu-inspired approach based on political field. Inside this network and arena, political agents develop discourses, known as the principles of vision and division, as part of their strategies of accumulation of political capital. These strategies influence how these actors conceive and respond to external events. In this way, they reproduce the logic of their fields, based on the history of the political struggles, in the international arena through foreign policy discourses; in other words, they internationalise their internal power struggles. The case of the Turkish and Iranian model discourses demonstrate this. The AKP’s democratic-religious principle and the anti-imperialist principle emerged as the factors that shape Turkish and Iranian regional discourses, respectively. This dynamic is particularly interesting in the case
of Iran. Its foreign policy posture, based on the Islamic Awakening discourse, reflected more the domestic political experience of the ruling conservative coalition than the reality of the region. Therefore, I describe the approach as a case of hysteresis, in respect to the Middle East regional space.

Another aspect to consider is the establishment of the homology between different political agents in the regional political space. This development, which arises in the (perceived) presence of historical and positional analogies between agents in different fields, ties together different power struggles, thus affecting agents’ strategies of accumulation. This is the case of the AKP–Muslim Brotherhood relationship. Erdoğan’s investment in the Arab Islamist group regarded more their common position in their respective fields as religious groups committed to democratic mechanisms and the free market as well as the Brotherhood’s eagerness to “borrow” the Turkish model for its own political interest than common identities and ideologies. The establishment of this relation of homology has had a profound impact in both the AKP’s approach towards the region (not just Egypt) and strategies of accumulation at home, which began to increasingly rely on the international dimension.

24 Both in the constructivist and Gramscian senses.
Chapter 4

The Middle East political space and the logic of counterrevolution: The Saudi, Turkish and Iranian political fields between the Egyptian coup d’état and the Syrian civil war

This chapter analyses the second phase of the symbolic struggle for the Arab Spring, namely the “counterrevolution”. Particularly, it analyses the impact of the July 2013 coup in Egypt, which ousted the Islamist Morsi administration, thus ending the short-lived democratic experiment in the country, and the repression of the uprising in Syria, which soon escalated into a civil war. In doing so, it brings Saudi Arabia into the picture. In Section 2.3, I illustrated the “Saudi variant” of political struggle, where, given the “restricted membership” of the political field (de facto reserved for the members of the Saudi family), the political power resides on the capacity of different positions within the field to build alliances, or homologies, with other social actors situated in other fields. The most important alliance around which the Saudi field of power has been constructed is the one between the political establishment itself and the Wahhabi clergy in the religious field. Thus, the main form of power struggle in Saudi Arabia is the struggle between the holders of political capital and the holders of religious capital. In particular, this struggle concerns those political agents within the Wahhabi tradition in marginal positions within the field, such as the Sahwa. The Arab Spring created the conditions for a “new round” for this struggle. The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and political Islam in regional politics offered actors in the religious field (and their allies in the field of cultural production) the opportunity to challenge the boundaries of the political field. Facing this challenge, the political establishment acted swiftly to preserve its monopoly of political capital.

In addressing the reactions to the Egyptian coup and the Syrian revolution, this chapter also tackles the issue of the so-called sectarianisation of regional politics. The salience of sectarian
identities during the Syrian civil war has led many scholars to conceptualise the post-Arab Spring Middle East through the lens of a sectarian regional competition (see, for instance, Abdo, 2013, 2016; Laborie Iglesias, 2013; Byman, 2014; Elhadj, 2014). This is an understanding that, as explained in the introduction, presents empirical puzzles, such as the failure of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar to create a united Sunni front in Syria. This thesis offers a different interpretation of the relationship between sectarian identities, foreign policy behaviour and regional politics. By bringing Bourdieu into the picture, this work demonstrates how sectarianisation was both a result of the strategies of preservation of political agents in the fields of most powerful states (in particular from the Saudi field of power) and of the regional circulation of discourses among different national fields. Thus, sectarianism, more than being the main factor that characterises regional politics from the Arab Spring, is only one part of the wider symbolic struggle triggered by the regional upheavals.

This chapter illustrates how the adoption of Bourdieu’s field theory sheds light on the different strategies of accumulating political capital adopted by Saudi monarchy, the Turkish AKP and the Iranian regime. It demonstrates that these agents synchronised their domestic political discourses to the events in the region to maximise their political and symbolic profits within both their national political fields and in the regional doxic battle. In doing so, the chapter is organised in four sections. First, it contextualises the different internal and regional strategies associated to the “Saudi authoritarian model” and the AKP’s democratic-religious model, respectively. Second, it analyses the doxic battle in the aftermath of the coup in Egypt. On that occasion, the Saudis supported the return of the Ancien Régime, while the AKP decried the actions of the Egyptian army – even at the expense of Turkish relations with Cairo – and the Iranian government, despite Sisi’s close relation with Riyadh and his initial engagement with the Brotherhood. Third, it examines the changing strategies of accumulating political capital adopted as a response to the Syrian crisis and the consequent increasing importance of sectarian discourses in the Middle East political space. Finally, the conclusions are provided.

4.1 Contextualising Saudi and Turkish position towards the Egyptian counterrevolution

In Summer 2013, just one year after the presidential elections, Egypt’s democratic experience was already on the verge of collapse. The Morsi administration’s poor handling of the country’s
economy eroded the support of the urban middle class. At the same time, the Muslim Brotherhood’s attempt to increase its political control over state institutions, including through the direct appointment of loyal individuals to the Shura Council (the upper house of Egypt’s parliament), exacerbated the already delicate relations between the Islamist government and other political parties (see Housden, 2013). The growing discontent with Morsi’s presidency resulted in the eruption of anti-government protests throughout the country, calling for the resignation of the President and the end of Muslim Brotherhood rule. This state of political tension paved the way for the return of the Egyptian military to power. On 3 July, following days of anti-government demonstrations and clashes, Morsi was ousted by the Minister of Defence, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who later assumed the presidency. The overthrow of the first elected President of Egypt was followed by a violent crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood, which culminated with the Rabaa Square massacre on 14 August 2013.

The July coup marked a turning point for the Middle East political discourse. On the one hand, in Saudi Arabia, as well as in other conservative monarchies of the Gulf, the coup and the subsequent anti-Brotherhood campaign in Egypt had the effect of facilitating the exclusion of similar Islamist groups from the religious and intellectual fields, thus further securing the dominant position of the ruling elite in the field of power. At the same time, the Egyptian Army’s return to power emboldened the orthodoxy25 in the Middle East. On the other hand, the political failure of the Muslim Brotherhood and the ousting of Morsi marked a setback for the AKP’s bid to impose its principle of vision to the Egyptian political field (and in the regional political space). As a response to the coup and the subsequent repression, Erdoğan took a strong stance against the new military regime in Cairo, causing a deterioration of relations between the two countries and increasing tensions with the regional backers of al-Sisi. However, the impact of the Egyptian coup on the AKP can be better understood when analysed in juxtaposition with the events of Gezi Park and the internal political contestation against the AKP rule. The combination of regional and domestic threats and the subsequent strategy adopted by (a part) of the AKP as a response triggered a restructuring of power relations in the Turkish political field. This section contextualises the different responses in Saudi Arabia and Turkey to the coup. First, it explores the motivations behind the Saudi counterrevolutionary strategy. Second, it analyses the internal politico-religious debate in Saudi Arabia during the

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25 Here, as in other parts of the thesis, I adopt Bourdieu’s understanding of orthodoxy as ‘a system of euphemisms, of acceptable ways of thinking and speaking the natural and social world, which rejects heretical remarks as blasphemies’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 169). In the case of the Middle East political space, the “orthodox discourse” consists of the way of thinking of the pre-Arab Spring Middle East political space, which is the vision of regional order that underpins the legitimacy of the authoritarian principle.
outbreak of the Arab Spring and the initial regional rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. Third, it examines the changes occurring in the Turkish political field in response to both the 3 July Coup and Gezi Park protests.

4.1.1 The logic of the counterrevolution: Symbolic order, political stability and the Saudi response to the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood

The Arab Spring represented a great challenge for the domestic and regional positions of Saudi political agents. According to one report, the Saudi ruling family was dismayed by the overthrow of Mubarak in Egypt as well as by Barack Obama’s support for the end of the military regime in Cairo and the following decision to engage with the Muslim Brotherhood (see Alterman and McCants, 2015, p. 161). It is also clear that Egyptian–Saudi relations soured during Morsi’s presidency, to the point that Riyadh withheld funds promised to Egypt in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising (ibid, p. 162). Thus, it should not come as a surprise that the Saudi regime, along with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), played a significant role in the 2013 coup. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia was the first foreign leader to send a message of congratulation to the military-appointed interim President, Adly Mahmud Mansour, while widespread rumours suggested that Saudi intelligence was directly involved in the planning of the coup (Riedel, 2013). Moreover, the Saudis pledged US$5 billion in economic aid to the new military regime (Peel, Hall and Saleh, 2013) in addition to the promise of replacing any military and economic aid the US could have cut following the coup (Riedel, 2013).

The Saudi’s backing of the Egyptian coup can be hardly understood through mainstream IR theories. The Muslim Brotherhood’s rise to power in Egypt did not lead to a radical shift in Egyptian foreign policy. Surely, there were some elements of discontinuity from the Mubarak era. One of these was the improvement of relations with Iran, which were marked by Morsi’s above-mentioned visit to Tehran. However, as I have illustrated in the previous chapter, the Muslim Brotherhood’s stance on the Syrian civil war, reiterated by Morsi during the 2012 Non-Aligned Movement summit in Tehran, prevented a real geopolitical alignment between the two countries. Thus, a realist account based on a Saudi–Iranian proxy war in the Middle East does not seem convincing in explaining the Saudis’ animosity towards the Morsi administration. The same can be affirmed for a sectarian understanding of regional dynamics since the two countries are both enlisted in the “Sunni camp”, and both the Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia supported the “Sunni struggle” against the Alawite Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Likewise,
a “Wendtian” constructivist approach is not particularly helpful, since a perspective based on state identity would have expected relations between Riyadh and Cairo to be cooperative.

An interesting understanding of Saudi policy towards Egypt is offered by the issue of regime survival. As Gause reminds us, domestic regime security is the ‘paramount object’ of Saudi political action (Gause, 2014, p. 206). According to this perspective, the political model represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, and political Islam in general, represents an ideological threat to the Saudi family rule. This would explain the lack of cooperative relations between Riyadh and the Morsi administration (see Gause, 2015; Ryan, 2015), as well as the failure of Saudi Arabia to cooperate with AKP-ruled Turkey against Iran (Gause, 2015, p. 17). However, to understand this ideological hostility, it is necessary to bring the Saudi internal socio-political context into the picture. In this operation, Bourdieu is particularly useful. Here, I argue that the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and the subsequent strengthening of the “Turkish model narrative” in the Middle East had emboldened a pro-reform discourse in the Kingdom. This put considerable pressure on the Saudi political field, which was seeing its boundaries (restricted to the royal family) questioned by other social actors, who, in certain cases, were directly linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. As a response, the Saudis “entered” the regional symbolic competition in defence of the pre-Arab Spring regional order and of its authoritarian model of governance, starting with support for the return of a military dictatorship in Egypt and for the repression of the Muslim Brotherhood region-wide.

While Turkish and Iranian political agents adopted foreign policy discourses aimed at reshaping the regional political space to promote forms of political capital widely employed in their national political fields, the Saudi regime mobilised its material and symbolic resources in a different direction. The point of this strategy, which can be summarised as a strategy of conservation or simply “counterrevolution”, was to preserve the Saudi political class’s position of power both in the national field of power and in the regional political space. This position rests on a configuration of regional politics that rewards “stability” and “anti-terrorism” over “democratic legitimacy” and “anti-imperialism”. Saudi foreign policy discourses reflected this regional normative structure. However, another aspect that should be considered is the impact of the Arab Spring within the Saudi power structure, which rests on the separation between the ‘holders of political power and holders of cultural (mainly religious) power’ (Stein, 2015, p. 69), that is, on the de-politicisation of religious discourse. This is obtained through aligning the dominant political group and the dominant religious group, which serves to legitimise both and to marginalise other positions (jihadists, Sahwa, etc.) in the field of power. As illustrated
in Section 2.3.1, this configuration dates back from the very construction of the two fields, which started with the famous 1744 agreement between Muhammad bin Saud and Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab. Since then, the Saudi state have been dominated by two elites, the Saudi royal family and the Wahhabi ulama, which successfully monopolised the political and religious fields, respectively (see Lacroix, 2011, pp. 8–9).

The fact that these two groups belong to two separate and autonomous spheres of social life does not mean that they do not collaborate. On the contrary, they rely on each other. As Lacroix illustrates, the capacity of the Saudi royal family to maintain the boundaries of the political field, and thus to preserve the stability of the Saudi monarchical system, rests on the capacity of the political elite to co-opt dominant groups from other fields, especially from the religious and intellectual fields. This co-optation is obtained through an exchange of symbolic and material resources, which serves to depoliticise religious discourse without necessarily affecting the relative autonomy of the religious field (Lacroix, 2011, pp. 27–29). This exchange can be exemplified as follows. On the one hand, agents of the political field provide economic capital (through donations to religious foundations) or symbolic capital (in appointments to important positions in the official religious institutions) to the players of the religious field. On the other hand, the religious practitioners compete against each other for these resources while at the same time providing religious capital (by producing fatwa that legitimise government decisions) that is easily convertible into symbolic resources by royal family members (see ibid.).

This homologous relationship reflects Bourdieu’s understanding of the relationship between political and symbolic order. According to Bourdieu, the structure of the religious field ‘tends to reproduce the structure of relations of force between groups or classes, but under the transfigured and disguised form of a field of relations of force between claimants struggling for the conservation or subversion of the symbolic order’ (Bourdieu, 1991a, p. 31). It follows that religious agents and institutions, by reproducing the symbolic order in which they operate, contribute to the maintenance of the political order, ‘that is, to the symbolic reinforcement of the divisions of this order’ (ibid.). In the case of Saudi Arabia, the struggle between various agents in the religious field has strengthened the logic of political field in two ways. First, the dominant players in the religious field have an interest in being the beneficiaries of resources granted by the regime, and, therefore, they tend to identify themselves (their dominant position in the religious field) with the dominant political actor, a strategy that can be found in other fields in Saudi Arabia, including the intellectual field (compare Lacroix, 2011). Second, the
Wahhabi religious doxa, with its ‘political’ principles, such as *ta ’at wali al-amr* (the obedience to the Emir) (Sulaib, 2020), assumes a function of censorship in the public debate, insofar as it transforms any contestation of the political order into a breach of the “sacred” symbolic order. However, these homologies between dominant groups in different fields rule out neither the possibility of political change nor the emergence of conflicts between political and religious fields and agents. In periods of internal and/or international crisis, profound changes in the religious field, usually carried out through the charismatic action of what Bourdieu calls a ‘prophet’, that is, a bearer of a ‘charismatic power’, can inspire socio-political transformations (Bourdieu, 1991a, pp. 33–38). These symbolic revolutions, which Bourdieu applies not just to the religious field but also to other fields of cultural production, are able to mobilise different actors from different fields in the direction of a total rupture of the social order. This happens because players in the fields of cultural reproduction – especially, as Fowler (2020, p. 433) notes, ‘the subaltern members within the dominated fraction of the dominant class’ – in carrying out their struggle, produce principles of vision and division that serve the interests of dominated actors in other fields of society (Bourdieu, 1996a, p. 387; Fowler, 2020, p. 455). In 2011, a series of events created the conditions for this change in Saudi Arabia. In particular, the events seemed to embolden those societal actors with a more or less close association with the Muslim Brotherhood, while at the same time, the configuration of the regional political space that underpinned the Saudi regime’s power position entered into crisis. In this context, Saudi foreign policy worked as a conservation strategy of both the regional and internal order. In its approach towards Egypt, by legitimising the coup (and the al-Sisi regime), the Saudi regime succeeded in both re-establishing a “stability principle” within the Middle East political space, while, at the same time, rolling back any type of symbolic and social mobilisation that could have questioned the political order (starting from the boundaries of the political field).

4.1.2 The Arab Spring and the internal political–religious debate in Saudi Arabia

In the Saudi religious field, the outbreak of the Arab Spring triggered a confrontation between the “official” Wahhabi clergy and the group of *ulama* linked to the *Al-Sahwa Al-Islamiyya* movement. As illustrated in Section 2.3.2, the habitus of the *Sahwa* is the outcome of a process of its members’ socialisation within an educational field dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood (the result of a policy of Islamisation of Saudi society adopted during the reign of King Faisal) and the internalisation of the religious field’s Wahhabi doxa. This can be described as a
combination of the Brotherhood’s political and socio-cultural discourse and Wahhabi religious practices (see Lacroix, 2011, pp. 37–80). The movement emerged in the 1970s and became a prominent player in numerous fields of Saudi social life, particularly the religious, intellectual and educational. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Sahwa had a positive relationship with the Saudi regime. However, this state of affairs changed in the early 1990s, when, following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the Saudi government allowed the deployment of American troops in the national territory both to protect the Kingdom against the perceived threat posed by Saddam Hussein and to lead the military effort to liberate the small neighbour. This controversial decision was the object of harsh criticism by both ulama and intellectuals from the Sawha movement, which revealed the revolutionary potential of religious-inspired political discourse in the Kingdom (see Lacroix, 2011). The protest faded away over several years, and many personalities linked to it were jailed. However, the ulama were eventually pardoned and reintegrated into the religious field. At the same, the experience of this contestation paved the way for a new position in the intellectual field directly connected with the Sahwa intellectuals: the Islamo-liberals (ibid, pp. 245–248).

Both the Sahwa-affiliated clerics and the Islamo-liberals welcomed both the outbreak of the uprisings throughout the region and the Islamist successes in the first elections held in the post-revolutionary countries with great enthusiasm. The influential Sahwa-affiliated cleric Salman al-Awda (who had already accumulated considerable prestige for his opposition to the regime’s pro-American foreign policy) was particularly vocal. He even authored a book entitled Questions for Revolution, in which he expressed his sympathy for the political demands of the Arab streets and affirmed that ‘revolutions happen when deep and serious reform is absent … People don’t provoke revolutions, only repression, oppression, corruption, backwardness and poverty provoke revolutions’ (quoted in Lacroix, 2014, p. 11). He reiterated this position in an open letter directed to King Abdullah in March 2013 (ibid; Matthiesen, 2015, p. 3). Other religious personalities and intellectuals linked to the Sahwa soon made similar demands. A possible turning point was also the creation of the first Saudi political party, the Umma Party, which, in its founding document, called for democratic reforms, parliamentary elections, separation of powers and ‘the enforcement of Islamic values in domestic and foreign policy’ (Steinberg, 2014, p. 8; see also Lacroix, 2014, p. 8; and Alterman and McCants, 2015, p. 159). The creation of a political party broke a taboo in Saudi socio-political discourse, posing an unprecedented challenge to the boundaries (and doxa) of the Saudi political field.
This political agitation in the Kingdom was characterised by the constant use of Islamic references to justify the mobilisation against the government (including during the declaration of the ‘Day of Anger’, see Lacroix, 2014, p. 12). The deployment of religious language in the strategies adopted by the opposition clearly reflects the type of cultural capital these actors possess (especially, but not exclusively, those religious and intellectual personalities linked to the Sahwa). However, it also reflects Bourdieu’s considerations on the relations between political and religious order, in particular on the complementarity between political and symbolic subversion. The situation was even more delicate for the regime in recognition of the concomitant upheaval of the regional order. In particular, the increasing prestige of the Turkish model, which led to an appreciation of new forms of political capital (such as “democratic legitimacy”) in the Middle East political space, was a potential cause of concern for the Saudi regime. By putting its increasing weight behind the Muslim Brotherhood, the AKP’s foreign policy discourse seemed able to undermine the pillars of the Saudi-led authoritarian regional order. This subversive strategy carried out by the Erdoğan government during the crucial period of doxic change in the region, which aimed to impose the AKP’s democratic-religious principle on other political fields, created the conditions for forming new dominant political agents in the regional political space whose legitimising resources were democratic credentials and Islamic religious/cultural capital. This development would have meant a devaluation of the Saudi players’ political capital.

The temporary success of the democratic-religious principle in the doxic battle, and the consequent possibility of a structural alignment between the Turkish political field and other fields in the Middle East, had the potential to also affect the legitimacy of the Saudi monarchy at home. The Kingdom’s subjects were not immune from the Turkish charm. This fascination started even before the Arab Spring. As Samaan notes, the strong stance Erdoğan showed towards Israel (which started before the outbreak of the uprisings) earned him the approval of the Middle East public opinion as well as the flattering comparison with Nasser (Samaan, 2013). This approval reached an impressive peak in Saudi Arabia, where, according to a 2011 survey, 98% of the population held favourable views of Turkey, while 76% saw Turkey’s contribution to the stability of the Arab world as ‘positive’ (Zogby, 2011, pp. 3–4), a support that seems to have also remained stable throughout 2012 (Zogby Research Services LLC, 2014, p.29). The extent of Erdoğan’s popularity in the Kingdom, as well as the enthusiasm that surrounded the Arab uprising and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, initially constrained the Saudi government’s official reaction towards the regional upheaval.
The immediate response to the regional turmoil was to preserve the authoritarian configuration of power at home by preserving the boundaries of the political field and, therefore, the configuration of power in the fields of cultural production. In this preservation strategy, the regime could count on the support of dominant religious actors, who saw the preservation of the political order as crucial for the conservation of their position of power within the religious field. For instance, the Kingdom’s Grand Mufti Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah Al-Sheikh condemned the uprisings in the region by describing the events as ‘planned and organised by the enemies of the Umma’ to ‘strike the Umma and destroy its religion, values and morals’ (quoted in Lacroix, 2014, p. 3, and in Stein, 2021, p. 201). The Council of Senior Scholars, the most important religious institution in the Kingdom, tackled the issue by issuing a fatwa: ‘the protests are haram, prohibited by the Islamic Law. Saudi Arabia is based on the teachings of the Quran, Sunnah, and the notion of “ta’at” [the obedience]’ (quoted in Sulaib, 2020, p. 67).

This attempt to frame a contestation of the political order as a breach of the religious one was accompanied by practices of exclusion against the Muslim Brotherhood. The most important of these practices consisted of placing these groups outside the Wahhabi/Salafi doxa of the religious field. Accordingly, the Wahhabi religious establishment issued a fatwa denying the ‘Salafi roots’ of the Brotherhood (Darwich, 2016, p. 482), while the head of the Muslim World League, Sheikh Mohammad Alissa, accused the organisation to have ‘infected’ Salafism with ideas of rebellion (Stein, 2021, p. 200).

At the same time, the regime adopted a combination of economic measures and political repression to placate the street. On the one hand, the government spent up to $130 billion to increase salaries, build affordable housing and finance religious organisations (Kamrava, 2012, p. 98). The latter was particularly necessary to guarantee a de-politicisation of the religious discourse. On the other hand, it also started a campaign of intimidation and repression against reformist actors. One of the victims was the new-born Umma Party, which saw seven of its founders arrested (Lacroix, 2014, p. 13; Alterman and McCants, 2015, p. 160). However, from 2011 to 2012, the political establishment avoided taking an open anti-Brotherhood position in its foreign policy discourse partially because of the group’s popularity within the domestic religious field. This does not mean that the regime did not defend its power position, and the position of the Saudi political field, in the regional political space. For instance, despite Morsi’s conciliatory practices (like making his first state visit in Riyadh or ensuring that he would not meddle in Saudi’s internal affairs), the Saudi regime maintained cold relations with
Morsi-led Egypt and also withheld some of the funds promised to the country after the fall of Mubarak (Alterman and McCants, 2015, p. 162).

The Saudi “low profile” attitude was “balanced” by other regional actor with a similar position in their national political field, especially the Emiratis, who promoted a fiercer rhetoric against Islamist movements in the region. For instance, during the January 2012 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) National and Regional Security Conference, the chief of the Dubai police, Dhahi Khalfan, described the Muslim Brotherhood as ‘a security threat to the Gulf’, which was ‘no less dangerous than Iran’ (Freer, 2015, p. 20). At the same time, the Emirati Foreign Minister and member of Abu Dhabi’s royal family, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan, openly accused the organisation of violating ‘the sovereignty and integrity of nations’ and called for a greater cooperation between the Gulf countries to deal with this challenge (ibid.). Thus, even before the Egyptian coup, it was possible to observe exclusionary practices adopted by the conservative monarchies towards the Brotherhood, which sharply contrasted with the Turkish and Iranian strategy of including the organisation within their respective regional strategies.

In summary, in Saudi Arabia, the Arab Spring led to an unprecedented debate on the nature of the country’s political system. This debate reflects the struggle between holders of political capital and prominent, but not dominant, agents in the religious field. The revolutions and the following rise of the Muslim Brotherhood permitted the adoption of international strategies by the latter, in which they borrowed symbolic capital, in terms of prestige, from regional Islamist groups to question, and potentially subvert, the configuration of the field of power. In other words, the success of religious-inspired political groups abroad offered the possibility to convert religious and cultural capital into symbolic capital and thus to force a change in the social order (including in the boundaries of political field). Facing this challenge, the dominant political group responded by mobilising state resources as well as its social capital. In this operation, the dominant positions in the religious field (the Wahhabi scholars) were particularly useful, insofar as they were in the position to condemn as “heresy” any subversive use of religious capital. In this first phase of the Arab Spring, the Saudi regime focused on limiting the damages that the upheavals caused to the legitimacy of the authoritarian principle of vision. Afterwards, it took a much more active role in preserving its principle. In that case, which will be analysed in the rest of the chapter, Saudi foreign policy took the form of an externalisation of the struggle of the national field of power. At the same time, as I discuss later, the counterrevolution (especially in Egypt) emboldened the regime’s position in the field,
internalising external events to its advantage and legitimising its principle of domination. From the coup in Egypt, the Saudi regime developed a strategy of preservation both in the national fields of politics and power and in the regional political space, thus acting as double agent.

4.1.3 Gezi Park and the crisis of Erdoğan’s domestic hegemony

Since May 2013, even before the coup in Egypt, the AKP experienced a decline of prestige both at home and abroad with a subsequent partial depreciation of its political capital. This shock was the consequence of a crisis situation that affected the symbolic dominance of the party and of its leader Erdoğan, which materialised with the outbreak of the Gezi Park protests. The demonstrations, which started in Istanbul on 28 May 2013 and subsequently spread across the country, were the results of a synchronisation of the positions of different actors situated in different fields in Turkish society, which eventually led to the development of homologous strategies of resistance. This process was made possible by the combination of the AKP’s neoliberal policies, increasing authoritarianism after the 2011 elections – which marked a significant gap from its political discourse – and the active promotion of a social-conservative “way of life” (which included, among other things, education reform, restrictions to the consumption of alcoholic drinks and Erdoğan’s invitation to Turkish families to have “at least three children”). The urban project that sought to replace the historic Gezi Park with a compound comprising a shopping mall and a mosque, and the initial repressive response of the police towards the demonstrators, represented the catalyst for the cross-field crisis.

In addition to exposing Erdoğan and the AKP to accusations of hypocrisy for their stance towards the democratisation of the Middle East – with a subsequent loss of prestige for the democratic-religious principle – the Gezi Park protests created divisions within the dominant political group. In their responses to the violent clashes between the protesters and the police (which led to at least three causalities), some AKP senior members, including Bülent Arınç (Deputy Prime Minister) and Abdullah Gül (President of the Republic), defended the right to protest and apologised for the excessive use of force (Al Jazeera, 2013b). Similarly, Ahmet Davutoğlu stated that ‘political participation and opposition’ were ‘an encouraging progressive instrument of democracy’ and that the presence of peaceful demonstrations in the country

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26 In this sense, the Gezi Park mobilisation was similar to the May 1968 students revolt in France, as described by Pierre Bourdieu in *Homo Accademicus* (see Bourdieu, 1988).

27 This chapter does not develop the Gezi Park protests further, since it is beyond the scope of this thesis project. For a more accurate account on the issue, consult Gürcan and Peker (2015).
reflected the ruling party’s ‘achievement in expanding democratic participation and debate’ (Davutoğlu, 2013, as quoted in Ozkececi-Taner, 2017, p. 210). However, Erdoğan took a tough stance against the protest, famously denouncing the activists as “looters”, or “marauders” (the term used by Erdoğan was “çapulcu”). The clash between these two positions within the AKP can be seen in a bitter exchange involving Gül and Erdoğan. In this episode, Erdoğan, after being informed that Gül had declared that ‘democracy does not mean election alone’ and that peaceful demonstrations of dissent should be allowed, affirmed that, for him, ‘democracy is all about the ballot box’ (Frazer, 2013).

These tensions in the political field, where Erdoğan’s position within the AKP was, if not challenged, at least tested, were accompanied by significant developments within the intellectual and religious fields in which positions that used to be associated with the AKP, namely liberal intellectuals and the Islamic movement led by Fethullah Gülen, criticised the government. For instance, Mustafa Akyol, a journalist who used to be aligned with the party, argued that Erdoğan’s new Turkey was no longer a democratic model for the Middle East and that it resembled a ‘poor imitation of the Kemalist “Old Turkey”’ (Akyol, 2014, as quoted in Ozkececi-Taner, 2017, p. 211). At the same time, the protests further exacerbated the relations between Erdoğan and the charismatic Islamic scholar Gülen, whose movement Hizmet was influential in many fields of society and played a major role in the rise of the AKP’s core social constituency, the conservative bourgeoisie. Erdoğan and Gülen were already at odds on many issues, including the former’s discourse towards Israel and foreign policy initiatives in the region (Cornell, 2014). In this conflictual context, Hizmet exploited the protests to question Erdoğan as the legitimate political representative of the dominant social class. Media associated with the movement were particularly critical of government’s response (ibid.). However, criticisms from these segments of society and the disagreements within the ruling party did not lead these actors from different fields to synchronise their struggle and carry out a common strategy of subversion. This was because Erdoğan was able to reassert his leadership within the AKP. Already in June 2013, the then-Prime Minister held a series of political rallies, which attracted a considerable number of supporters. Particularly impressive was the one held in Istanbul on 17 June. On that occasion, a particular passage from Erdoğan’s speech, as reported by the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, reflects his strategy of conservation:

Is Zenica here? Is Angola here? Is Myanmar here? Every time the audience answers, it goes on for minutes, from Gaza to Baghdad, from Basra to Aleppo. Erdoğan has not yet made a single substantive statement, but the audience is ecstatic and feels part of something big (Martens, 2013, my translation).

This reveals not only that Erdoğan’s prestige among the AKP’s core constituency was still intact, as well as his political capital and his capacity to exercises symbolic power within the dominant group, but also the importance of foreign policy discourses in maintaining this dominant position within the political field. This can be seen also in relation to the strong stance taken by Erdoğan towards the Egyptian coup. In that case, condemning the coup and military authoritarianism in Egypt served as a strategy to mobilise religious and conservative constituencies behind the AKP in a moment of internal legitimacy crisis (Hoffmann and Cemgil, 2016, p. 1282; Yeşilyurt, 2017). Therefore, the hazardous foreign policy choice to support Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood can be considered as a strategy of accumulation of political capital adopted by Erdoğan to maintain his leadership within the AKP and, subsequently, by the party as a whole to maintain its dominant position in the political field. However, this strategy was not elaborated in a vacuum. The long history of coups that afflicted Turkish political life, as well as the historically conflictual relations between the Kemalist military and the Islamist political movement, undoubtedly affected the AKP’s perception of the July 2013 events in Egypt (Ayata, 2015, p. 109; Yegin, 2016, p. 411). The strategy therefore reflected the historical trajectory of the AKP, internalised in the party’s habitus. This led to an identification with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s struggle against the secularist military establishment. These two intertwined aspects should both be considered in analysing the AKP’s stance on the events in Summer 2013.

In conclusion, Gezi Park represented a turning point for the Turkish political field and, consequently, for Turkish foreign policy. The conflict within the AKP and among its constituency paved the way for an evolution of the party’s political message both at home and, in a certain sense, in the region. Chapter 5 explains this in greater detail, but, in any case, by illustrating the conflict and the use of foreign policy discourse to secure Erdoğan’s position, this subsection sheds light on an important difference between a Bourdieu-inspired theoretical approach to international politics and historical sociologist and historical materialist approaches. While most of the latter’s accounts see foreign policy as the externalisation of the dominant class’s hegemonic ideology (see Hoffman and Cemgil, 2016; Yalvaç, 2016; Stein,
2021), a Bourdieusian account would question that on the base that the autonomy of the political field could produce practices not necessarily in line with the interests of the economic bourgeoisie as a whole. On this point, Bourdieu says that while the dominant class aims to legitimise its domination through symbolic reproduction, it tends to do so through intermediaries, such as ideologues and political parties, which serve the class only if it is in their interest and ‘always threaten to appropriate for their own benefit the power to define the social world that they hold by delegation’ (Bourdieu, 1991b, p. 162, see also pp. 182–183). In the case of Turkey, the AKP served the interests of the Turkish bourgeoisie by sustaining the party’s accumulation of political capital. However, once Erdoğan’s position in the political field became threatened, he rearticulated the political discourse28. In other words, as I illustrate in Chapter 5, he isolated those factions of the dominant class that questioned the legitimacy of his position within the political order by redefining the political order to attract new social forces and mobilise new political capital. Therefore, foreign policy discourse, as a part of the wider principle of vision of the political order, is not always the externalisation of the ideology of a united dominant class but rather part of a struggle for the political representation of this class – struggle in which the domination of the political field and political agents’ position in the field of power are at stake.

4.2 The coup in Egypt and the Middle East political space

The reactions of Turkish, Saudi and Iranian political agents to the ousting of Mohammed Morsi reflected their trajectories both in their respective political fields and in the regional political space. In Turkey, the response reflected Erdoğan’s attempt to preserve his position as the legitimate leader of the AKP and, at the same time, the attempt to defend the “homologous” political agent in the Egyptian political field. In Saudi Arabia, it reflected the monarchy’s adopted strategy of preserving the boundaries of the political field, which, at that moment, was exporting its political discourse (and internal power struggles). In Iran, the coup fuelled a debate between orthodox and heterodox positions on the cause of Morsi’s collapse. However, since the Iranian players had failed to establish a meaningful relation with agents in Egypt’s political field, it did not (and could not) intervene in the struggle. Thus, regional responses to

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28 This shift is also noted by Stein (2021, p. 207), who affirms that the party ‘transformed from an ideological vehicle for the “devout bourgeoisie” to an appendage of the personalised rule of […] Erdoğan’. This behaviour of the political group towards its social constituency is better grasped by Bourdieu’s understanding of political representation, a theoretical aspect that is demonstrated in this thesis.
the 2013 Egyptian coup reflected a symbolic struggle between the Turkish model and the
Saudi-sponsored “authoritarian model”, which formed a clash of two different principles of
vision and division in the regional political space. On the one side was the democratic-religious
principle, developed by the AKP within its national political field and exported to Middle East
national fields through the strategies of reproduction of political agents affiliated with the
Muslim Brotherhood. On the other side was the Saudi authoritarian principle, which was
reproduced in the form of preserving “regional stability” to legitimise the restoration of a
despotic and anti-democratic political order throughout the region.

The language used by Erdoğan and the AKP in condemning the coup reflected the first position.
For example, in one of the early reactions to the events, the then-Turkish Prime Minister
affirmed that there was ‘no rule other than the ballot box in a democracy’ and that the coup
was an insult to ‘the preferences of the majority’ and thus ‘an attempt to destroy democracy’
(Erdoğan, 2013, as quoted in Yegin, 2016, p. 412). Erdoğan reiterated the issue in a CNN
interview in July 2014, stating that ‘Sisi is not a democrat … he is right now a tyrant’ (Erdoğan,
2014, as quoted in Pala and Aras, 2015, p.296). Davutoğlu echoed Erdoğan by reaffirming that
‘the governments elected by [the] public should go with only the public decision, their
overthrow by coup d’état is unacceptable’ (Davutoğlu, 2013, as quoted in Yegin, 2016, p.412).
The adoption of this strong stance was in line with the historical trajectory of the Islamist
movement in the Turkish political field (which had been internalised in the AKP’s habitus);
some of the anti-coup statements made by Erdoğan, AKP officials and pro-AKP media
contained clear references to the past coups that afflicted Turkish political life (see Pala and
Aras, 2015, p. 297). The repressive turn taken by the Turkish government did not affect this
democratic discourse as Erdoğan had maintained a sort of commitment to the democratic rules
of the game, even though they were framed in an ultra-majoritarian and non-liberal fashion
(‘democracy is all about the ballot box’).

On its part, the Saudi royal family welcomed both the coup and the subsequent repression of
the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, framing the actions of the Egyptian military as
counterterrorism (Alterman and McCants, 2015, p. 163; Stein, 2021, pp. 200–202). For
instance, in his statement of support for the bloody crackdown of pro-Morsi protesters in Rabaa
Square in August 2013, King Abdullah stated: ‘The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, its people and
government stood and stands by today with its brothers in Egypt against terrorism’ (Al-Jazeera,
2013a). He also called on ‘the honest men of Egypt and the Arab and Muslim nations … to
stand as one man and with one heart in the face of attempts to destabilise a country that is at
the forefront of Arab and Muslim history’ (ibid.). Abdullah’s remarks reproduced a pre-Arab Spring configuration of the political order, which underpinned the power position of the Saudis in the Middle East and their monopoly over political power at home. The “promotion” of a discourse based on ‘stability’ involved the delegitimisation of the Muslim Brotherhood and its foreign backers. Thus, in the same statement, the King not only denounced ‘terrorism, deviance and sedition’ but also ‘those who try to interfere in Egypt’s internal affairs’ and who were ‘tampering with and misleading’ Egyptian people (ibid.), claiming that ‘they themselves are fanning the fire of sedition and are promoting the terrorism which they call for fighting’ (Al Arabiya, 2013). This was not just an ill-concealed ‘admonition’ towards Turkey and Qatar (Pala and Aras, 2015, p. 296) but also a strategic choice of words aimed at excluding pro-Muslim Brotherhood discourses and practices within the Middle East political space. At the same time, the Saudis and their allies in Abu Dhabi ‘sought to punish the Turks, freezing them out of regional diplomacy and cancelling investments in Turkey’ (Cook and Ibish, 2017, p. 5).

In response to the Saudis’ stance, Erdoğan criticised the Gulf monarchies for ‘collaborating with the military intervention’ and ‘condoning terrorism’ (Pala and Aras, 2015, p. 296). Interestingly, the AKP’s strategy in condemning Saudi support relied not only on an argument based on democratic legitimacy but also on a kind of political–religious one. Davutoğlu expressed this during an interview with Richard Falk in September 2014. On that occasion, the then-Minister of Foreign Affairs depicted the post-coup perspectives as a choice between two options. The first was democracy, which, however, ‘threatened countries like Saudi Arabia’. The second was ‘the secular option’, which consisted in the return of power of ‘autocrats’, who, even though they ‘might be religious in their social life’, would have adopted a ‘purely secular’ system of governance (Davutoğlu and Falk, 2014). This conception of secular governance is curious, since it seems to contradict the speech delivered by Erdoğan in front of the Muslim Brotherhood’s leadership in Cairo in September 2011. However, as previously explained, a consequence of the export–import of the democratic-religious principle from the Turkish political field to the Arab ones was the removal of the term “secularism” by the agents in the fields of reception. This removal is more evident with Davutoğlu’s contraposition between “democracy” and “secularism” (as if these two terms were antithetical), which represents an attempt to mobilise different Arab political agents in the regional political space behind the democratic-religious principle and in opposition to the coup and the Saudi discourse based on “stability”. Thus, Davutoğlu’s remarks reflected an alignment between the AKP and the Islamist parties in the Middle East. Moreover, the statement also aimed at embarrassing and
delegitimise the Saudis’ actions, which, considering the weight of religious capital in the Saudi field of power, put the political establishment in a delicate situation.

Saudi support for the coup was the object of a heated debate within the country, and, in particular, within the religious field, in which certain Saudi sheiks, especially those linked to the Sahwa, were extremely vocal in their criticism of the regime’s endorsement of the coup. In performing this act of “rebellion” against the holders of political capital, the dissidents deployed their religious capital. A prominent example is offered by the “moderate” Nasir al-Umar (who was also linked to the Sahwa but did not usually intervene in the political sphere), who argued that it was ‘forbidden to rebel against a Muslim ruler’ and that the events in Egypt were ‘a struggle between the Islamic project and the Westernizing project opposed to Islam’ (Lacroix, 2014, p. 26). On another occasion, he also affirmed, via Twitter: ‘Don’t those who support the Felul’s29 revolution and the Tamarrud movement30 in #Egypt against their legitimate leaders know that by doing so they validate the legitimacy of revolution in their countries and revolt against their rulers!’ (quoted in Alterman and McCants, 2015, p. 167). Moreover, he also denounced the Rabaa Square massacre as an act against religion, even condemning the perpetuators to eternal damnation (ibid). On his part, Salman al-Awda reacted to the August 2013 events by tweeting: ‘It is clear who is driving Egypt to its destruction out of fear for their own selves’ (quoted in Alterman and McCants, 2015, p. 163). Meanwhile, on 8 August 2013, fifty-six clerics, some of them close to the Sawha and to the Saudi branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, issued a condemnation of the ousting of ‘a legitimately elected president’ while expressing their ‘opposition and surprise at the path taken by some countries who have given recognition to the coup, … thereby taking part in committing a sin and an aggression forbidden by the laws of Islam’ (Lacroix, 2014, p. 26). Therefore, it is clear that the condemnation of the coup became a powerful political and religious tool against Saudi political dominant group. As Matthiesen notes, the four-finger symbol of the Rabaa massacre started to be extensively employed in social media ‘as a form of contestation against the Saudi government’ (Matthiesen, 2015, p. 5). The symbol was eventually banned by the authorities.

In response, the regime detained some activists and adopted measures that targeted certain actors within the religious and the intellectual field. In March 2014, it eventually declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation. The regime could also count on favourable

29 Felul is a term often used to refer to the remnants of Mubarak regime
30 The Tamarod or Tamarrud is the movement who organised the protests against Morsi and later supported the coup and the instauration of al-Sisi regime
developments in the regional political space, which were translated into political and symbolic capital to be spent at home. One of these developments was the Syrian civil war (which is considered in Section 4.3.1). Another was the consolidation of the al-Sisi regime in Cairo. The post-coup government was waging war with the Muslim Brotherhood, thus legitimising the Saudis’ internal security practices by presenting them as part of a regional anti-terror effort. Moreover, important actors in the Egyptian political and religious fields were reproducing some of the strategies used in Saudi Arabia to guarantee a balance between religious and political power. For instance, the main Salafist party in Egypt, the al-Nour party – which is close to dominant Saudi political and religious groups and received funds from the Saudi state (Wehrey, 2015, p.76) – supported the removal of Morsi and the instauration of al-Sisi, thus reproducing in the Egyptian political and religious field the strategy of differentiation adopted by Wahhabis/Salafists in the Saudi religious field. Moreover, members of the religious establishment also endorsed the coup and the military’s action against pro-Morsi protesters. The most famous case was that of former Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa, who, in front of an audience of military personnel, encouraged the army to shoot at Morsi’s supporters (Anadolu Agency, 2013a). This not only provided the fundamental religious and symbolic capital necessary for the restoration of the Ancien Régime in Egypt but also allowed the Saudi political group to better legitimise their monopoly of political capital in the national field of power. Therefore, the events of Summer 2013 allowed the Saudi political class to accumulate political capital at home and to harmonise the Egyptian political field with its own, thus defending its dominant position in the regional political space.

The AKP’s situation was more intricate. On the one hand, the overthrown of the Muslim Brotherhood can be considered not just as a geopolitical setback for the country but also a blow to the strategy followed by the party in the symbolic struggle for the Arab Spring. On the other hand, however, the condemnation of the coup helped the party and Erdoğan to partially overcome the legitimacy crisis that started with the Gezi Park protests. Condemnation of the coup was widely shared throughout the Turkish political field. As Mustafa Akyol notes, all the political parties, including the CHP (which used to be close to the secular Turkish military establishment) criticised the events in Egypt, thus showing that ‘military interventions were simply not welcome anymore in Turkey’, whether ‘at home or abroad’ (Akyol, 2013). This does not mean that the CHP fully accepted the AKP’s discourse in relation with Egypt. Already in September 2013, a delegation of the main Turkish opposition party visited the country to meet state and civil society officials (including senior members of the Muslim Brotherhood)
(Hürriyet Daily News, 2013b). However, as the AKP criticised the move, CHP officials clarified that they considered the overthrown of Morsi as a ‘coup’ and that they did not meet al-Sisi, while they were ready to meet Morsi (Anadolu Agency, 2013b).

After the Rabaa Square massacre, references to the Egyptian political situation and authoritarianism became a recurrent practice employed by the AKP in the political field. These included comparing the domestic political opposition to al-Sisi. For instance, in 2014, during a local election rally held in Hatay Province, Erdoğan claimed that voting for the CHP meant voting for the Egyptian dictator (Anadolu Agency, 2014). At the same time, the four-finger salute representing the Rabaa Square massacre became a widely used political symbol in political rallies held by Erdoğan and the AKP (Ayata, 2015, p. 106; Yeşilyurt, 2017, pp. 14–15). These practices helped the dominant political group to maintain a form of democratic legitimacy, thus counteracting the negative effects of the increasing authoritarianism at home (Hoffmann and Cemgil, 2016, p. 1282). Hence, supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and deploying a “pro-democracy” foreign policy discourse on the Middle East remained a strategy of accumulation of political capital even after the Egyptian coup, thus favouring confrontational relations with Cairo. This is an aspect that would be puzzling if considered through a structural realist lens, especially if we also consider that, at the time, Turkey had bad relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran, too.

The competition between the religious-democratic principle and the authoritarian one was undoubtedly the most salient issue during the bloody confrontation between the military establishment and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. In this context, the position of the Iranian actors and the Islamic Awakening discourse was overshadowed. As far as this position is concerned, the Iranians did criticise the coup. However, this stance was ‘less vociferous’ than that of the AKP and definitely more fragmented (Stein, 2015, p. 70). As Fürtig notes, Iranian mainstream media condemned the coup and blamed a coalition of ‘Zionists, reactionary Arab countries and the West’, which ‘not only killed Egyptians and intensified the crisis in this country’, but also silenced ‘the cries of oppression of the people of Bahrain and Palestine’ (2013, pp. 12–13). However, this type of discourse, which reflects the doxa of the Iranian political field, was counterbalanced by other practices. For instance, in a conversation with his Egyptian counterpart, Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi affirmed that only the Egyptian people ‘should determine the fate of their country’, while even defining the Egyptian army as ‘a national army’ (Maloney, 2013).
The lack of a strong, unified stance against the restauration of a secularist, pro-Saudi and (likely) pro-West regime was the outcome of the different positions taken by the various Iranian agents both in the Middle East political space and in the national political field. In the previous chapter, I have illustrated how the attempt made by the Ahmadinejad government and by Khamenei to frame the Arab Spring as an Islamic Awakening failed to obtain any recognition by the Muslim Brotherhood. In other words, the Iranian anti-imperialist habitus found itself in a situation of hysteresis, thus failing to translate its foreign policy practices into any meaningful change in the regional political discourse. This was particularly evident when other regional actors, notably including the Morsi administration, rejected the attempt made by the Iranians to exclude the Syrian uprising from the Arab Spring. As a result of this failure, relations with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Iranians became rather cold. Therefore, the Iranian reaction was a sign of abandoning the strategy of subversion based on the Islamic Awakening discourse and on the promotion of the Iranian anti-imperialist principle of vision.

Moreover, the Iranian political field was experiencing a change in its power relations, which resulted in the election of Hassan Rouhani and the rise to government of other actors with a different habitus. This change started with the progressive decline of Ahmadinejad’s faction, the neoconservatives, which was the most committed to the anti-imperialist rhetoric. The decline was partially due to the controversial 2009 elections; however, the main cause was the political struggle with the Supreme Leader. The final defeat of Ahmadinejad’s faction was obvious when the Guardians Council rejected the bid for the presidency of Esfandiar Rahim-Mashaei (a loyalist of Ahmadinejad), a move that marked the almost definitive marginalisation of the neoconservatives from the political institutions (Hunter, 2014, p. 226). At the same time, a coalition between reformists and the so-called “pragmatic conservatives” (the political faction close to Rafsanjani) was formed under the candidacy of Hassan Rouhani, which eventually won the 2013 presidential elections.

The rise to power of this new coalition led to a shift in foreign policy practices. This is attested by the reaction to the coup. If it is true that the entire Iranian political spectrum criticised Morsi’s performance, it is also true that the content of this criticism varied according to the various factions. As Stein notes, while the conservatives argued that the Brotherhood failed because it ‘remained subservient to U.S. and Israeli diktats’ and because did not purge the political system of ‘counterrevolutionary elements’ (thus not following the ‘Iranian example’),

31 The struggle and the neoconservatives’ strategies of differentiation are illustrated in Section 5.2.1.
the reformists contend that Morsi’s authoritarian practices and incompetence were also to blame (Stein, 2015, p. 70). At the same time, Khamenei’s emphasis on democratic legitimacy strengthened Rouhani’s position within the system, thus signalling the official “blessing” of the Supreme Leader to the new ruling coalition (ibid.).

In summary, the focus on the concept of political field offers an important insight on regional responses to the Egyptian coup. For instance, in the case of Saudi Arabia, neither a realist notion of interest and power nor a constructivist account based on identities and ideational factors grasp the animosity towards the Muslim Brotherhood. Rather, the nature of this conflictual relation can be found in the trajectories of different agents in the Saudi field of power and in how these agents related to other regional actors. In this framework, Saudi support for the coup is understood as part of a strategy of preserving the dominant political group’s monopoly over political capital, a strategy that consisted of exporting the group’s authoritarian principle. In Turkey, the internal confrontation among different factions within the AKP, which was triggered by the events of Gezi Park, challenged historical materialist and historical sociologist accounts of foreign policy as the externalisation of a social class’s ideological hegemony. Rather, Erdoğan’s support for Morsi is understood as a strategy for preserving his status as the legitimate representative of an increasingly fragmented social group in the political field. The internal confrontation within the dominant political group, combined with the decline of the democratic-religious principle in the regional political space, have had profound consequences in the Turkish political field, as I explain in Section 5.1.2. As for Iran, the “meaning” of the Egyptian coup was surely contested in the political field; however, Iranian players could not have much influence on the events and thus did not try to intervene. Since Egypt’s Islamists rejected the Iranian anti-imperialist principle of vision, Iranian political agents did not develop a homology with any agents in Egypt’s political field. One of the reasons for this could be found in the Iranian attitude and discourse towards the Syrian uprising.

4.3 The Syrian uprising and strategies of political and symbolic capital accumulation

The outbreak of the uprising in Syria and its subsequent escalation into a civil war fuelled by foreign powers was a turning point for the Arab Spring. The violent conflict between the al-Assad regime, supported by Iran, and the opposition, supported by Turkey and Saudi Arabia,
emphasised what many scholars see as the increasing securitisation of sectarian identities on regional politics. The fact that most of the Sunni Arab population in Syria – which constitutes the absolute majority in the country – supported the rebellion against the Alawite ruler is not overlooked by many observers. The civil war has thus been depicted as part of a sectarian “cold war” that pits an Iran-led “Shia crescent” against a loose alliance of Sunni powers, which includes Saudi Arabia and Turkey (see, Abdo, 2013, 2016; Laborie Iglesias, 2013; Byman, 2014; Elhadj, 2014). However, although it would be naïve to ignore the increasing salience of sectarian discourse in regional politics, this type of characterisation risks offering a rather orientalist understanding of regional dynamics. An alternative, and more nuanced, perspective sees the sectarianisation of Middle East politics as part of counterrevolutionary strategies adopted by regional actors, especially by the Saudi regime (see, for example, Matthiesen, 2013; Hashemi and Postel, 2017; Stein, 2021, pp. 193, 196, 201). However, as Dodge argues, in adopting this argument, it should be avoided to assume ‘that without the self-seeking ruling elites, sectarian mobilisation would not take place, and differences in religious doctrine or ritual would not have been politicised’ (2020, p. 110). This mobilisation is made possible by particular socio-historical conditions presented both in the political field (Dodge, 2018; 2020) and in the religious field. In the case of the Middle East, for instance, the impact and content of sectarian discourses varied according to both different strategies of accumulation of political capital and different national conditions. The analysis of the three case studies in this section demonstrates this point.

For the regional actors under analysis, namely the AKP, the Saudi regime and the Iranian agents, the issue of Syria presented significant challenges, not just in geopolitical and security terms, but also in terms of the “legitimacy” of the protest and of the various external interventions in favour of the rebellion or the regime. Despite initial hesitation, the Iranian regime strongly supported the al-Assad regime, framing this support within a discursive framework that combined the war on terror and anti-imperialism. On the contrary, both the Turkish government and the Saudi regime supported the rebellion, albeit on different grounds. While the AKP focused its discourse mainly on democratisation and humanitarianism, thus depicting the uprising as a rebellion against a tyrant, the Saudis employed a sectarian discourse (the Sunni uprising against the Alawite regime). These discourses reflected the different positions the various actors occupied in the region and in their respective national fields. In this sense, the struggle over the definition of the Syrian civil war is part of the doxic battle for the new Middle East. Here, these actors mobilised different types of capital to impose their own
principles of vision and division on the revolt. At the same time, these regional strategies were functional to internal strategies of accumulation of political capital in the national political fields. This section illustrates the different strategies of political and symbolic capital accumulation adopted in relation to the Syrian crisis. First, it addresses the Saudi regime’s sectarian strategy, followed by the Iranian reaction to Syria, which led to the eventual abandonment of the Islamic Awakening discourse. Finally, I analyse the AKP’s strategy.

4.3.1 The Saudi field of power and the Syrian uprising

Saudi support for the Syrian uprising seems to contrast with its counterrevolutionary attitude towards other countries during the Arab Spring, especially in the case of Bahrain, where the Saudi regime sent troops to quell the revolt against the ruling al-Khalifa family. This supports a realist understanding of a Saudi–Iranian regional proxy war, according to which Saudi Arabia aided its Bahraini ally (a fellow GCC country) and undermined an Iranian ally (Bashar al-Assad) to contain Iranian influence in the region. As possible evidence of this claim, the Saudi regime and its allies adopted a strong anti-Iranian rhetoric during the unrest in neighbouring Bahrain. This anti-Iranian thesis is also underpinned by the sectarian thesis briefly presented above. Anti-Shia discourses were frequently used during the repression in Manama (compare Matthiensen, 2013). At the same time, however, this anti-Iranian thesis does not explain why the Saudis failed to cooperate with Turkey and Qatar in creating a unified anti-Assad front in Syria. The anti-Iran/anti-Shia discourse is part of the same “logic of counterrevolution” that underpinned the campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood.

The anti-Iran/anti-Shia discourse was employed by the regime not only to discredit the protests (especially those taking place in the Shia-populated Eastern Province) but also, as some scholars note, to prevent any collaboration between Sunni and Shia opponents of the regime (Matthiesen, 2013, p.: ix; Lacroix, 2014, p. 13; Stein, 2021, p. 200). However, as Matthiesen specifies, ‘sectarianism was not just a government invention but the result of an amalgam of political, religious, social, and economic elites who all used sectarianism to further their personal aims’ (Matthiesen, 2013, p. ix). In other words, exclusionary practices against the Shias were already present in various fields of Saudi society, including (and especially) in the

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32 For instance, in a GCC meeting convened in April 2011 (therefore, during the crackdown of the protests in Manama), the organisation passed a motion calling on ‘the international community and the Security Council to take the necessary measures to stop flagrant Iranian interference and provocations aimed at sowing discord and destruction’ and inviting ‘the Iranian regime to stop its provocations’ (Kamrava, 2012, p. 99).
religious field, thus explaining the fact that the political agents were able to mobilise various segments of society behind a sectarian discourse. ‘The problems associated with being Shia in Saudi Arabia are therefore not just about political economy or identity politics, they are also about religious beliefs per se’, since ‘the acceptance of Shia Islam as a valid school of Islamic law is anathema to the Wahhabi clerics’ (Matthiesen, 2014, p. 8). These dynamics of exclusion favoured a process of politicising Shia religious identity. Although the majority of Shias in the religious field were socialised into the “moderate” Shirazi movement, this did not prevent the creation of more radicals groups like the pro-Iranian Hizbullah al-Hegiaz. At the same time, the most powerful active position in the Eastern Province protests was occupied by Ayatollah Nimr al-Nimr, a former Shirazi who adopted a more confrontational discourse against the royal family (Matthiesen, 2015, p. 10).

The antagonism between Sunnis and Shias in the religious field, which reached its peak in the 1980s in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution, did not prevent practices of cooperation in other fields, especially in the intellectual field. As Alterman and McCants note, ‘Prior to the Arab uprisings, Sunni critics of the government regularly met with Shi‘ite leaders and argued that the regime was just trying to divide the Islamist opposition and prevent it from pushing for political reforms’ (Alterman and McCants, 2015, p. 165). However, following the developments in the region and the consequent strategy adopted by the dominant political group, this type of cross-sectarian solidarity was put under pressure. As Matthiesen notes, ‘none of the key Sunni Islamist leaders spoke out in support of the protests in the Eastern Province, despite repeated efforts by the Shiite protesters to adopt inclusive and national slogans, for example by calling for the release of Sunni political prisoners’ (Matthiesen, 2015, p. 10). Prominent Sunni religious agents, including the Sahwa sheiks, also failed to support the so-called ‘Day of Anger’, which the regime successfully discredited by ‘adding Shiite references’ to the content of the webpages supporting the event (Lacroix, 2014, p.13; also quoted in Stein, 2020, p. 200). Moreover, the Sahwa sheiks did not even support the uprising in Bahrain. For instance, the League of Muslim Ulama (an organisation led by Nasir al-Umar and which includes many Sahwa sheiks) stated that the events in Bahrain had nothing to do with the Arab Spring. According to the organisation, ‘in those countries [namely Tunisia and Egypt], what took place were peaceful revolutions by a whole people demanding freedom and dignity, while what happens in Bahrain is sectarian chaos (fitna ta’ifiyya) aimed at eradicating the Sunni presence both in society and government, and is refused by the majority of the people’ (Lacroix, 2014, p. 5). Overall, the Sahwa’s position on Bahrain mirrored the
government’s, according to which the anti-regime mobilisation was sectarian and orchestrated by Tehran (ibid.).

Sahwa sheiks were nevertheless supportive of the Syrian uprising, to the point that they even encouraged young Saudis to join the anti-Assad rebellion (Matthiesen, 2015, p. 6). Therefore, by supporting the Syrian rebels, the Saudi regime was able to accumulate a significant amount of symbolic capital, thus strengthening its dominant position in the national political field, in the national field of power and in the regional political space. This point was certainly clear to Salman al-Awd, who noted that ‘the Saudi government used the Syrian issue to position itself as a champion of revolutionary forces after having become the main actor of the Arab counterrevolution’ (Matthiesen, 2015, p. 6). By taking lead of anti-Assad efforts at home, the political field was able to shape the internal debate on the Syrian issue, which soon took the shape of a sectarian struggle, especially in the religious field.

The Saudi political field and field of power exported this logic into the regional political space through foreign policy discourses. In this endeavour, Saudi media were influential in circulating sectarian discourses in the region. A prominent example is represented by the actions of Adnan al-Arour. This populist clerics, infamously known for saying that ‘Alawites who had helped the regime would be put in a meat grinder and their flesh then fed to the dogs’, had extensively used Saudi Arabia TV channels for launching sectarian messages, while, at the same time, criticising the “official” (pro-AKP and pro-Qatar) opposition for its ineffectiveness (Sands, 2012; The Economist, 2012; Baylouny and Mullins, 2018, p. 997). The circulation of these discourses overlapped with other strategies of accumulating political capital adopted by other agents, notably Bashar al-Assad, whose regime portrayed the rebellion as Jihadist and Salafist to mobilise minorities and the secular middle class (see Phillips, 2016, p. 55), or even the Iranian conservatives, who deployed a discourse based on an “unholy” alliance between American–Zionist forces and radical Sunnis (see Section 4.3.2). As a result, these strategies, because of the stock of symbolic capital mobilised behind them, influenced the regional political discourse and created a widespread perception of a sectarian conflict in the region, which affected not just the academic and cultural field but also the international political realm. For instance, President Obama referred to the conflict in the Middle East as one caused by ‘ancient sectarian differences’ (Hashemi, 2016, p. 65), thus echoing a dominant primordialist paradigm that dominated the debate on the Syrian civil war in the West and in international politics in general. This development prevented a “democratic drift” of the Syrian uprising – an outcome that the Saudis also sought by directing intervening in the internal power struggles
within the Syrian opposition, supporting whomever opposed the Muslim Brotherhood and its sponsors, Salafist and secularist alike (Phillips, 2016, pp. 121–123) – thus favouring the preservation of the Saudi authoritarian principle of vision.

Nevertheless, the beneficial effects of the strategy based on sectarian discourse were limited. In particular, a risk associated with sectarianism was the strengthening of the jihadi positions within the Saudi religious field, which, as the experience of Osama bin Laden taught, was also a source of challenge to the religious legitimacy of the Saudi regime. To prevent this, the regime took a series of measures, such as banning Saudi nationals from fighting in Syria or sending money through private channels to rebel groups. The Wahhabi clergy acted against jihadism in the religious field. For instance, in June 2012, the Council of Senior Ulama stated that Saudi Muslims could not fight in Syria (Alterman and McCants, 2015, p. 169). When the risk became tangible with the rise of Daesh, the regime began to be more cautious in its support for the revolt, while the official religious institutions condemned the group.

4.3.2 The end of the “Iranian model”: The readjustment of the Iranian position in the Middle East political space and new developments in the Iranian political field

As illustrated in Chapter 3, Ahmadinejad’s government and Khamenei alike rationalised the events of the Arab Spring through the lens of the “Islamic Awakening formula”, according to which a combination of Islamic religious discourse and anti-imperialist political credentials assure the legitimacy of a political system. The second aspect is particularly important, since anti-imperialism has a central role in the doxa of the Iranian political field and it is regularly deployed in the foreign policy discourses of Iranian political actors. Therefore, anti-imperialism was the main “ideological good” that exported by the Islamic Republic in the Middle East political space. In this sense, the Syrian uprising was a source of great concern. Although the Assad regime was nationalist and secular, its anti-imperialist credentials were assured by its refusal to sign a peace deal with Israel and its belonging to the Axis of Resistance. Therefore, the reaction of the Iranian government was to draw a distinction between the Syrian uprising from the Islamic Awakening. This distinction was however rejected by the main regional actors, starting from the Muslim Brotherhood’s government in Egypt, on the ground of the “moral duty” to help the “Syrian brothers” against the tyrant.

In other words, it seemed that the emerging post-Arab Spring regional order was one based on democratic credentials above all. Therefore, the anti-imperialist habitus that the Iranian agents
developed in their national political field was “out of tune”, especially when they tried to sell the discourses associated to this scheme of dispositions as the ‘new regional norm’. However, the Iranian political actors could not dismiss this modus operandi, at least not without drastic changes in the internal political order. The result was to the abandonment of the strategy of subversion associated to the Islamic Awakening discourse to pursue a strategy of conservation based on a fight against an “American–Zionist-sponsored terrorism”. This allowed a shift in the Iranian regional posture, from “revisionist” to “status quo” power, without significantly changing of the content of internal political power dynamics.

In the regional political space, the active support for Assad’s position led to a significant loss of symbolic capital for Iranians. The support of Assad angered the Arab-Sunni masses and led to the accusation of sectarianism for Iranian agenda in the region, thus devaluing Iranian political capital in the regional dimension and, therefore, devaluing the Iranian model as a political product. Nevertheless, on their parts, Iranians had employed the sectarian discourse, combined with anti-terrorism and anti-imperialism, to make sense of its change of side in the Arab Spring, both internally and externally, and the subsequent abandonment of the Islamic Awakening discourse (Fürtig, 2013, p. 16) and therefore, of any meaningful attempt to subvert the regional order. One instrument of this new strategy was to represent the uprising as an American and Zionist plan to divide the region. For instance, Khamenei described the events in Syria as attempt by ‘the arrogant front’ to destroy ‘the chain of resistance in the region’ (Khamenei, 2012, as quoted in Fürtig, 2013, p. 16). Moreover, he also mentioned the creation of Daesh as a part of this American–Israeli strategy, thus claiming that terrorist groups were an imperialist tool directed towards the Islamic Republic and the region as a whole (Stein, 2021, p. 196). As a part of this strategy consisted also in the deployment of the term ‘takfiri’ to describe anti-Assad Islamist Sunni movements (see, for example, Fürtig, 2013, p. 15; El Berni, 2018, p. 123; Stein, 2021, p. 196). This strategy, based on the merging of Sunni extremism and American imperialism, allowed the Iranian political establishment to reframe the “anti-terror” intervention in Syria within the political doxa of the Islamic Republic.

This operation had the effect of reducing the new moderate/reformist government’s margin of manoeuvre. As Hassan Rouhani took office in 2013, the new ruling political coalition, echoing the position of many agents in the political and religious fields, tried to question the country’s involvement in Syria. For instance, several months after his election, Rouhani affirmed that the only solution to the Syrian crisis was a political one, which included both ‘government officials and opponents’, thus distinguishing between the latter group and ‘small terrorist groups’
(Rouhani, 2013, quoted in Akbarzadeh and Conduit, 2016, p. 140). Moreover, the President and his coalition (including former President Rafsanjani) expressed their concerns over how the pro-government intervention affected Iran both financially and ideologically (Ansari and Tabrizi, 2016, p. 3). However, the conservatives and the IRGC, with the decisive support of Khamenei, defended the ‘resistance narrative’ (ibid.). Khamenei’s support for this approach, in virtue of his dominant position in the political field, was particularly troubling for the moderate–reformist coalition. As a result, the “takfiri-anti-imperialist discourse” on Syria became the only foreign policy discourse allowed in the political field. As a further sign of the surrender of the governing coalition, during a meeting with the Syrian Foreign Minister, the new Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif reiterated Iranian support for Assad on the grounds of the common struggle against ‘takfiri’ groups (Akbarzadeh and Conduit, 2016, p. 146). In sum, the Syrian crisis marked the end of the Iranian attempt to claim power over definition of the transformation of the Middle East. In other words, the anti-imperialist principle, from a vision of political legitimacy, shifted from claiming the representation of the Arab masses in an attempt to construct a new regional political order to mobilising a much smaller regional constituency behind the preservation of the pre-Arab Spring Middle East.

4.3.3 The AKP and the sectarianisation of the regional political discourse

Before the outbreak of the uprising, relations with Syria and Bashar al-Assad’s regime were considered the greatest success of the zero problems with neighbourhood policy. Under the AKP administration, Turkish–Syrian relations, earlier characterised by hostility, warmed. Under the AKP government, Ankara and Damascus signed bilateral trade agreements (January 2007). Moreover, visa requirements between the two countries were lifted in September 2009, allowing for greater flows of trade and investment. These new practices not only challenged the old foreign-policy practices of the Kemalist establishment, historically oriented towards securitisation and hostility towards Damascus (also caused by the Syrian support for the PKK), but also presented new market opportunities for the provincial-religious bourgeoisie, whose success in the economic field was functional to the AKP’s strategies of accumulation of political capital. Therefore, good relations with Damascus were a central part of the pre-Arab Spring discursive framework developed by the party, known for the famous formula zero
problems with neighbours; prior to the uprising, the improvement of relations with any regional government was a powerful instrument for the strategy of subverting the Kemalist order. However, as the Arab Spring also reached Syria, good relations with Bashar al-Assad’s regime turned out to be incompatible with the AKP’s regional position as a model for the post-revolutionary democracies in the Arab world. The first reaction was to combine good relations with Assad and regional democratisation by persuading the regime to make the necessary steps for a peaceful transition to democracy. Hence, in March 2011 (at the beginning of the protests), Erdoğan ‘announced that he had spoken with Assad and counselled quick implementation of social, economic, and political reforms, while offering Turkish help to achieve the changes’ (Taşpinar, 2012, p. 137).

However, the al-Assad regime ignored the AKP’s calls for reforms and opted for a violent crackdown in dealing with the protests. At the same time, the perception of Turkey’s passive position angered part of the Arab public opinion and Syrian protesters (ibid, p. 137). As the situation degenerated, Turkey’s attitude changed, actively advocating regime change and criticising the regime’s behaviour mainly on the grounds of a pro-democracy and pro-human rights discourse. Moreover, the AKP government hosted the leadership of the official Syrian opposition and provided financial and military support for the anti-regime Free Syrian Army. Since then, support for the uprising became the main strategy of accumulation of political capital at home, despite the high price in terms of the country’s security and of economic losses, which affected in particular the central and southern Anatolian bourgeoisie. This is an aspect that highlights how the AKP and Erdoğan, in supporting the opposition (and in persevering on this path), put considerations based on their political habitus and their status in the national field and regional political space before their relations with the dominant economic class.

In carrying out this strategy, the AKP established strong relations with the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood, which lacked a consolidated presence on the national territory (a consequence of the violent crackdown inflicted by Hafez al-Assad in the 1980s), focused its political action on cultivating external relations, in particular with the AKP, which eventually led the organisation to develop a political dependency towards its Turkish

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33 On the connection between foreign policy discourse and trade relations with Syria, it is worth mentioning the bilateral trade agreement between the two countries initiated in 2007, which favoured an increase of Turkish exports to Syria from about $600m to $1.85bn (Phillips, 2012, p. 3). Importantly, the Independent Industrialists and Businessmen’s Association (MUSIAD), which represented the devout bourgeoisie of central and southern Anatolia, pressed the government for a policy of greater engagement and trade with Syria and the Middle East (ibid, p. 4).
counterpart (Stein, 2021, pp. 190–191). In other words, relations with the AKP became the only means through which the Muslim Brotherhood could accumulate the political capital necessary to dominate the anti-Assad front. However, as Stein notes, the Brotherhood’s bid for domination substantially failed (ibid.). Moreover, the AKP’s attempt to “diversify” its interactions with the Syrian opposition, which also included support for the rebel fringes considered “terrorists” (for instance, Jabhat al-Nusra), has led many Arab commentators to question Turkey’s real intentions in Syria (Samaan, 2013, p. 66). This also fuelled accusations of sectarianism by some analysts (see, for example, Letsch, 2013), with a subsequent loss of prestige in the eyes of some segments of the Arab public.

Regarding the “sectarianisation” of regional politics, as sectarian discourses and discourses on sectarianism entered in the Middle East political space, the AKP found itself in a difficult situation. On the one hand, the active support of Islamist actors in the Syrian war, accompanied by a bellicose rhetoric against Assad, attracted accusations of sectarianism, which affected the “democratic legitimacy” of the party’s stance on Damascus. This line of criticism also resonated within the boundaries of the political field, where the CHP accused Erdoğan of seeking the overthrow of Assad on sectarian grounds and of trying to import the Syrian war into Turkey ‘by emphasizing the Sunni–Alevi sectarian divides’ in the country (Özdamar, 2016, p. 100). It is partially true that sectarian practices and discourses against the Alevi minority in the field became more frequent in after 2011. For instance, Kılıçdaroğlu, (leader of the CHP and a member of the Alevi minority), was accused of being against the AKP’s policy on Syria because of an ‘alleged sectarian affinity with Assad’ (Lord, 2019, pp. 61–62). In a manner similar to Saudi Arabia, these practices can be seen as a part of a strategy aiming to delegitimise the internal opposition. In fact, the movement that emerged during the Gezi Park protest had considerable participation by Alevis, among other segments of Turkish society (see Saraçoğlu and Demirkol, 2015, p. 317).

However, in terms of mobilisation of political and symbolic resources, this strategy cannot be compared to the one adopted by dominant groups in Saudi Arabia, and it certainly did not have the same results. The reason lies with the historical trajectory of the minority within the political field. The discriminatory practices adopted in the religious field by Sunni clerics (Lord, 2019) had been contrasted by an “inclusive” approach adopted by the Kemalist military establishment in constructing the political field, which was based on an ethnic-nationalist principle of vision. Nonetheless, the relationship between Alevism and Kemalism is complicated and nuanced. This was influenced by the Kemalist elite’s attitude towards the religious field (which, in some
cases, resulted in the co-opting of certain Sunni groups, like in the 1980s). At the same time, the Alevis have been historically divided in two groups; the first consisted of Turkish-speaking Alevis, who embraced Atatürk’s secularist political project, while the second consisted of Kurdish-speaking Alevis, who initially opposed Atatürk and then generally turned to Kurdish political identity\(^\text{34}\). Therefore, the Alevis have never developed a distinctive agency within the political field, and the members of this religious minority have received their political socialisation mostly through centre-left or pro-Kurdish parties. As a result, in contrast to the case of Saudi Arabia, in Turkey the sectarianisation of political discourse, as somehow attempted by Erdoğan, did not lead to a considerable mobilisation and, therefore, did not favour the AKP’s strategy of accumulation of political capital.

4.4 Conclusions

This chapter sought to examine foreign policy discourses of the three cases under analysis during the 2013 Egyptian coup and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. The aim was to highlight how these discourses were the products of different strategies of accumulating political capital developed by political agents in their national fields. In doing so, the chapter first contextualised the discursive performances. It started by focusing on Saudi Arabia. Precisely, it illustrated the effect of the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in the regional political space on power relations within the Saudi field of power. Here, I argued that Saudi’s animosity towards the Islamist group and Morsi’s government could neither be ascribed to an alleged rapprochement between the new Egypt and Iran nor to arguments on state identities. Rather, the anti-Brotherhood stance was a response to the capacity of social agents in the Saudi fields of cultural production to exploit regional events in order to put the boundaries of the political field under pressure. The chapter then focused on the developments in the Turkish political field, in which the events of Gezi Park in 2013 questioned the AKP’s democratic credentials, its source of political and symbolic capital, and even triggered the unity of the political group. In this case, the Egyptian coup came as both a challenge and an opportunity. On the one hand, because of the AKP’s homologous relation with the group, the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood represented a failure of the democratic-religious principle. On the other hand, however, showing hostility to the return to power of the Egyptian military became an important aspect of the AKP’s strategy of accumulation of political capital. In particular, it helped to

\(^\text{34}\) For a deeper discussion on Alevi identity and Kemalism, see Kose (2013).
consolidate Erdoğan’s position within the party’s ranks and within the field despite his increasing authoritarian tendencies. This demonstrated that foreign policy discourses based on defence of democracy and human rights can become, through the performative action of a capable political agent, tools for reproducing an illiberal political order. Having provided this background, the chapter proceeded to reframe foreign policy discourses during the coup. In particular, it focused on the competition between the AKP’s democratic-religious principle of vision and division and the Saudi’s authoritarian principle. Here, I demonstrated how the symbolic struggle to promote a dominating principle of political domination in the regional political space went hand in hand with the changing strategies of reproduction in the national political fields.

These findings were substantiated by the analysis of foreign policy discourses during the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. In this case, the field-theoretical approach developed in this thesis is crucial to go beyond an explanation based on the Sunni/Shia divide. Here, I do not ignore the deployment of sectarian discourses throughout the region. Nevertheless, in addressing their relevance in regional politics and foreign policies, this work does not adopt a constructivist view, and it also avoids primordialist or instrumentalist accounts. Rather, I contend that, to grasp their relevance in regional politics, it is necessary to read them through the lens of the historical conditions of the different national political and religious fields. In this way, it is possible to collocate sectarian discourses within the different practical necessities of political agents who seek to preserve their positions in their national political fields. In the case of Saudi Arabia, where the religious field is characterised by the marginalisation of Shia positions, the deployment of sectarian discourses served to deprive democratic arguments of their mobilising potential, thus affecting the capacity of reformist social agents to exploit the Syrian rebellion to accumulate symbolic capital at the expense of the political elite. This strategy therefore served as a tool for the political field and the dominant group in the religious field to preserve their positions in the field of power. In the case of Iran, the civil war espoused even more the quixotic practice of equating anti-imperialist struggle with the demands that emerged during the Arab Spring. Facing this situation of hysteresis, the Iranian ruling coalition opted to support the Axis of Resistance, a decision that underscores their strategy of accumulating political capital based on the importance of anti-imperialist credentials at the expense of democratic ones. In this context, the rebel–Daesh–American imperialist nexus constructed by Iranian foreign policy discourse served to collocate the decision of supporting

35 For a brief summary of these schools, see Hashemi (2016, pp. 67–68).
the al-Assad regime within the boundaries of the doxa of the political field. As far as the AKP is concerned, because of the historical development of the political field, the sectarian discourse did not have the same mobilising potential of the Saudi case, thus only playing an “auxiliary role” – that is, to discredit the political opposition’s stance over the Syria policy – in the AKP’s strategy of accumulation of political capital.

In conclusion, the strategies of accumulation of political capital are the main driver of foreign policy in Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran. As a result, the dominant political groups of these states, in a bid to export their respective principles of vision, reacted to the regional events by externalising their strategies and thus their internal struggles. At the same time, we can appreciate the presence of complementary processes of internalising regional dynamics and struggles. This process comprised international strategies adopted by political agents to “borrow” political capital from abroad to enhance their position at home. In this chapter, we can find evidence of these strategies in how the AKP and the Saudi regime referenced the unfolding conflict in Egypt between the Muslim Brotherhood in their national struggle, thus treating the Egyptian political struggle as a surrogate for their own internal struggles. In this case, they mirrored the language used by the agent closer to their own position to enhance their political capital at home (“supporting Morsi in Egypt is basically supporting democracy in Turkey”), or to delegitimise their adversaries (“supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, which is a terrorist organisation in Egypt, is basically supporting terrorism in Saudi Arabia”). These exchanges of discourses and capital occurred at the symbolic level. Thus, they did not involve a transnational bourgeoisie but rather agents who were playing a double political game of defining the national and regional political order. This chapter has demonstrated the relevance of a Bourdieusian approach to international politics in understanding this crucial phase of Middle Eastern politics.
Chapter 5

The Turkish, Iranian and Saudi political fields after the Arab Spring

In Chapters 3 and 4, I analysed the symbolic struggle for the Arab Spring, which took the shape of a doxic battle over the imposition of a principle of vision and division, which would have legitimised the ideological domination of a particular political agent in the regional political space. In this context, the principles deployed by Turkish, Iranian and Saudi political agents through their foreign policy discourses were part of their strategies of accumulation of political capital in their respective national political fields. Thus, they were playing a double game, in which the attempt to reshape (or to preserve) the configuration of the regional political space overlapped with the enhancement (or preservation) of their positions in the national fields. In this game, they exported their political models to other political fields, thereby externalising their models, political discourses and internal political struggles. This export served the interests of the agents in their national fields. As Dezalay and Garth (2011, p. 279) write, agents tend to use the fields of reception ‘as laboratories’ for testing their models. In doing so, they tend to establish relations of homology with agents in the field of reception (like in the case of the AKP and the Muslim Brotherhood, or of the Saudi regime and the Egyptian army or Bahrain). This operation could have profound repercussions on the fields that produced these models. Agents can exploit the successful export of their discourse to enhance their stock of political or symbolic capital. This is the case for Saudi Arabia, where the triumph of authoritarianism in Egypt (along the disastrous democratic transitions in Libya and Yemen) secured the ruling family’s monopoly over political capital. In other cases, the failure of this endeavour could result in a loss of political capital for the “exporting agent”. As a consequence, the political field may experience significant changes in terms of power relations, strategies of reproduction and even in the configuration of the doxa.

In this chapter, I answer a fundamental question: Has the symbolic struggle for the Arab Spring, with its accumulations and losses of symbolic and political capital, had an impact on the domestic configurations of power in the Turkish, Iranian and Saudi political fields? This issue is particularly interesting when we consider the changes that occurred in the internal politics of
these countries after the regional uprising. In Turkey, where the AKP’s political experience was once regarded as a model of “Muslim democracy”, Erdoğan’s rule experienced an authoritarian, illiberal and nationalist turn. In Iran, the moderate–reformist Rouhani administration in Tehran managed to successfully carry out a complex negotiation with the “Great Satan” (and the other countries of the UN Security Council, plus Germany) on the nuclear programme issue. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia (the “winner” of the “battles of models” in the Arab Spring) experienced a succession to the throne (with Salman replacing Abdullah), which triggered a tortuous generational shift in the political system, marked by the rise of Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and his controversial new authoritarianism. Chapter 5 unpacks these changes through the analytical lens of Bourdieu’s field theory and illustrates how and to what extent the Arab Spring influenced these developments.

In fulfilling this task, the chapter is divided into three sections, one for each case study. First, I illustrate the evolution of the AKP’s political discourse in the Turkish political field, which coincides with the evolution of the strategies of accumulation of political capital. After the events of 2013, the democratic-religious principle was no longer functional for sustaining Erdoğan’s position in the political field. This triggered a shift in the party’s political message, which led to a restructuring of the positions in the political field, with significant consequences for the AKP’s national, regional and international discourses (particularly in the case of the party’s standing on the Kurdish question). Second, I analyse the rise (and fall) of the Rouhani government and of its supporting coalition (comprising pragmatic conservatives and reformists). Here, I further stress and demonstrate how the combination between the failure of the Islamic Awakening strategy of mobilisation and the power struggle within the conservative camp (which led to the dismissal of the neoconservatives) opened new political spaces for heterodox positions in the field, although limited to the negotiations with the US. However, the capacity of these positions to redefine the universe of political (and foreign policy) discourses depended also on regional discourses deployed by American agents. This has implications not just for the US position in the international realm but also for what America means for the habitus of the Iranian political agents and how relations with the US can be exploited to mobilise capital in the Iranian political field. Third, this chapter analyses the changes in the Saudi political field in the past few years, in particular the rise of MBS. In doing so, the post-Arab Spring scenario and the Saudi–American relations are brought into the picture.
5.1 The reconfiguration of the AKP’s habitus: From the democratic-religious principle to a religious-nationalist one

5.1.1 The Kurdish question and the changing strategies in the national political field and in the region

Since its foundation in 2001, the AKP had been able to accumulate political capital by successfully claiming the monopoly on political representation of a rising bourgeoisie through a message centred on a vision of democratic transformation of the political order. This democratic-religious principle determined the position of the political group in the national political field and in the international political space. However, the events of 2013, namely the repression of the Gezi Park protests and the coup against Morsi in Cairo, challenged the party’s position as an agent of democratisation both at home and abroad while, at the same time, devaluing democracy and democratic credentials as a political currency within the regional political space. Eventually, Erdoğan was able to exploit the regional events to preserve his position in the field and within the AKP, but these conditions of possibility that allowed the then-Prime Minister (who became President in August 2014) to mobilise the party’s core constituency behind him were changing. In particular, as previously demonstrated, agents belonging to social and cultural groups associated with the AKP started to criticise Erdoğan’s political performances. These voices found representation within the party itself, where a “liberal wing”, led by former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister Davutoğlu, saw with increasing scepticism Erdoğan’s plans to transform the political system from a parliamentary to a presidential one. However, the element that determined Erdoğan’s change of political strategy was the changing relations between the AKP and the Kurdish constituency, both in the national field and in the region.

One of the most successful aspects of the religious-democratic principle was the capacity to mobilise the Kurdish constituency behind a new vision of the Turkish national identity (see Section 2.1.2). Contrary to the Kemalist nationalist orthodoxy, the AKP mobilised a Kurdish constituency through a discourse based on a common belonging to a community built on equal citizenship rights and Islamic roots (see Taşkin, 2008; Akdeniz and Göker, 2011; Günay and Yörük, 2019). This vision was reflected in foreign policy discourses and initiatives, especially in relation to the Iraqi Kurds, and favoured the beginning of the peace process with the PKK in 2013. Moreover, the democratic-religious principle, with this message of political inclusion,
allowed the AKP to successfully claim the representation of Kurdish demands in the political field, as demonstrated by the fact that the AKP was the party that received the most votes among the Kurdish minority in general elections until 2015 (see Alpekín, 2018, p. 213; Günay and Yörük, 2019, pp. 20–21). However, this strategy of accumulation of political capital faced considerable challenges in the aftermath of the Syrian uprising, when the effective collapse of the Syrian state created the conditions for the military rise of the Democratic Union Party/People’s Defence Units (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat/Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, PYD/YPG), which created a de facto independent Kurdish entity in north-eastern Syria, exactly along the south-eastern border of Turkey.

Nevertheless, the AKP’s first approach was not one dictated by securitisation. At the beginning, Turkish–PYD relations were coherent with the AKP’s strategy of Kurdish inclusion. For instance, the PYD’s leader Salih Muslim was invited to Istanbul to hold a meeting with Davutoğlu (Hürriyet Daily News, 2013a). Later, Muslim and Turkish-Kurdish leader Demirtaş claimed that the AKP government gave the ‘green light’ for Kurdish autonomy in Syria (Candar, 2013.) Moreover, the government allowed the group to use Turkish soil. At the same time, however, Erdoğan endorsed the creation of the Kurdistan National Council (KNC), a coalition of several Kurdish parties sponsored by Barzani’s KDP, thus trying to infiltrate the emerging Kurdish-Syrian political field. Barzani also managed to mediate a deal between the PYD and KNC to create a unified Kurdish front in 2012. However, the deal soon fell apart due to the differences between the two groups (Reuters, 2012a). Contrary to the KNC, and to the AKP and the Syrian opposition, the PYD was ambiguous towards the Bashar al-Assad regime. The PYD refused to join any anti-Assad alliance, and joined the National Coordination Body, a coalition of leftist parties that opposed foreign intervention and advocated dialogue with the regime (Federici, 2015, p. 83). A turning point for the struggle over the claim of representing the Syrian Kurds was the war against Daesh, which reached its “epic” point with the siege of Kobane. The PYD’s victory granted the accumulation of a significant amount of symbolic capital for the PYD, both in the international arena and in the Syrian-Kurdish political field, thus cornering the KNC and allowing the PYD to impose its ideological position, based on Abdullah Ocalan’s Democratic Confederalism (ibid, p. 84), as the dominating principle of vision in the Kurdish transnational political field.

The initial positive and collaborative approach of the AKP towards the PYD/YPG demonstrates that the strengthening of the Syrian group at the border was not per se a source of concern for the Turkish government, as a neorealist perspective based on sovereignty would
suggest. Instead, the issue for the Turkish side was that the PYD/YPG, by refusing to adhere to the AKP’s vision of regional order, hindered the absorption of the Kurdish demands within the AKP’s democratic-religious principle. Therefore, as the PYD emerged as the de facto political authority, the AKP found itself in an awkward position. On the one hand, the opposition, including the CHP, was weaving the spectre of Kurdish independence in Syria (Butler, 2012). On the other hand, the ambivalent position of the AKP during the battle of Kobane, in which it was even accused of supporting Daesh (BBC News, 2014), led to a loss of the party’s prestige among the Kurdish constituency (and in the international political space as well). Simultaneously, the political field experienced the rise of a new position in the field, embodied by the Peoples’ Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP), led by Selahattin Demirtaş. This new pro-Kurdish party was able to mobilise significant portions of Turkish society, including feminists, socialists, LGBTQI+ organisations and environmentalists, thus reframing the Kurdish demands under a wider banner of democratisation (Günay and Yörük, 2019, pp. 31–32) and becoming the “party of all the minorities”. In deploying this new democratic principle, the HDP was very straightforward in stressing the gap between the AKP’s claim to be the “party of democratisation” and Erdoğan’s plans to increase the power of the Presidency within the political system. The political message promoted by Demirtaş, summarised by his famous slogan ‘we will not make you the President’ (Yilmaz, Shipoli and Demir, 2021, p. 9), was one of rejection of the political order envisioned by Erdoğan.

5.1.2 The rise of the religious-nationalist principle: The restructuring of the political field and the new AKP foreign policy discourse

The turning point for the AKP’s trajectory in the political field were the “double elections” in 2015. The results of the ‘electoral round’ of June came as a shock for Erdoğan and the AKP. For the first time since 2002 the AKP lost almost 9% of votes and the absolute majority of seats. At the same time, the HDP obtained more than 13% of votes, thus becoming the first “pro-Kurdish party” to cross the 10% electoral threshold and, importantly, surpassing the AKP as the most voted party by the Kurdish minority. These results were evidence that the religious-democratic principle had lost most of its appeal within the Kurdish constituency. The situation for the AKP was even more critical given the crisis of credibility the party was already facing in terms of the social coalition that provided the AKP with the political capital necessary to
sustain its position within the field: the devout bourgeoisie. As demonstrated in Section 4.1.3, this crisis already emerged with the repression of Gezi Park, which led middle-class intellectuals to criticise the government. At the same time, the conflict with Hizmet, which reached its dramatic peak after the attempted coup d’état of July 2016, posed a significant challenge to the party’s capacity to represent the devout bourgeoisie. The movement had had a significant role in advancing the interests of this class within the social, educational and bureaucratic fields, thus facilitating the rise of the AKP in the political field and the making of the “post-Kemalist” Turkish state (see Hendrick, 2015). The “failure” of the Arab Spring reinforced these developments; it not only demonstrated the limits of the AKP’s discourse in reshaping regional politics but also jeopardised its position in the political field as its core constituency questioned the party’s capacity to rule effectively.

It is this complex international/national scenario that we should consider when evaluating the AKP’s post-Arab Spring evolution in the political field. The possibility to resolve the inconclusive June 2015 elections through a coalition government, a decision initially supported by Davutoğlu, was simply not acceptable for Erdoğan. Given the circumstances, this would have not only led to a renouncement of the proposed presidential reform (a condition asked for by all possible coalition partners) but, in the long-term, would also have led to the decline of Erdoğan’s position within the political field. Thus, he opted for a change of strategy to regain credibility amongst his powerbase and to compensate the loss of the Kurdish constituency.

First, he prevented Davutoğlu’s attempt to form a coalition government and forced a return to the polls. The following electoral campaign was marked by a resurgence of violence with the PKK, and by the end of the ceasefire, Erdoğan portrayed the HDP as an extension of the PKK, thus implicitly depicting Demirtaş as a ‘terrorist’ (Yilmaz, Shipoli and Demir, 2021, p.10). This allowed the AKP to mobilise the nationalist constituency and to present itself to the middle class as the only political agent able to guarantee stability. Eventually in the November 2015 elections, the AKP was able to attract some of the voters of the Party of the Nationalist Movement (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP) and to regain its absolute majority in the parliament.

This development marked a shift in the AKP’s position in the field as well as in the Middle East. The AKP’s political discourse towards the Kurdish question changed from one of political inclusion within a democratic political order to one of exclusion and renewed militarisation. At the same time, the religious-democratic principle, which was no longer a useful tool for preserving Erdoğan’s position in the political field, was replaced by a “religious-nationalist”
principle of vision and division, able to mobilise certain factions within the bourgeoisie and the nationalist segments of society (including military officials and factions of the state bureaucracy). This shift in the political message marked the beginning of the end of the perfect homology between the Turkish bourgeoisie and the AKP. As it was no longer possible for the party to be recognised as the representative of the entire dominant economic class, Erdoğan decided to compensate by appealing to social actors who once opposed him. This demonstrates that, after all, ‘the production of ideas about the social world is always in fact subordinated to the logic of the conquest [and preservation] of power’ (Bourdieu, 1991b, p. 181). This shift did encounter forms of resistance within the AKP. However, with the dismissal of Davutoğlu as Prime Minister in May 2016, Erdoğan reassessed his position as the leader of the political group. This change in the strategy of accumulation of political capital led to a restructuration of the political field, which was accelerated by the 15 July 2016 coup attempt. The attempt was carried out by a faction within the Turkish Armed Forces, but it failed after an impressive number of supporters of the AKP, the police and the greater part of the army intervened against the rebels. Erdoğan accused Gülen, leader of Hizmet, for having masterminded the coup. Subsequently, the government started massive purges in all sectors of the state and civil society to eradicate the movement, with the subsequent narrowing of civil liberties and free press. At the same time, the popular uprising against the coup increased Erdoğan’s legitimacy and popularity, thus allowing him to successfully carry out the presidential reform with a referendum in 2017.

The accumulation of symbolic capital after the coup, its conversion into political capital through the referendum and the end of the engagement with the PKK allowed Erdoğan to approach the MHP and its leader Devlet Bahçeli from a position of strength. This resulted in the transformation of Erdoğan’s appeal to the nationalist constituency into an organic political alliance able to embody the new religious-nationalist principle: the People’s Alliance (Cumhur İttifaki). This new political group represents a new position in the field, whose strategy of reproduction seeks to mobilise a new constituency, both religiously conservative and nationalist. To enable this mobilisation, foreign policy discourses have been rearranged, with elements of both change and continuity. On the one hand, discourses towards the West, as well as towards the PKK/PYD, became more aggressive (Aras, 2019), thus reflecting the Alliance’s representation of the nationalist instances within the field. These discourses were accompanied by aggressive actions. Therefore, in 2015, the government ended the peace process with the PKK, while from Summer 2016, the Turkish army led three ground operations against the PYD
and its allies in northern Syria. On the other hand, Erdoğan maintained his aggressive rhetoric towards secularist authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. Relations with al-Sisi’s Egypt and al-Assad’s Syria have not improved in this period. At the same time, Erdoğan continued to be particularly vocal in his criticism towards Israel – including on the occasion of the 2021 clashes in Jerusalem (Reuters, 2021). Moreover, the Turkish government also slammed the so-called Abraham Accords, threatening to cut ties with the UAE over the decision to normalise ties with Israel (Butler and Gumrukcu, 2020). Whether Erdoğan will be able to maintain this strategy is still to be seen. Certainly the current economic crisis does not help. At the same time, the fragmentation of the political representation of the Turkish bourgeoisie is reflected in the defections from the AKP and the foundation of new political parties.

In conclusion, the ‘failure’ of the Arab Spring, that is, the unsuccessful attempt to unite the Middle East regional space under the ‘democratic-religious’ principle, had contributed to a profound reconfiguration to the Turkish political field. As a result, a new position emerged within the field, represented by a ‘religious-nationalist’ principle of vision. This arrangement of the political message has so far allowed Erdoğan to mobilise enough political capital to preserve a dominant position in the field. However, the virtuous circle created during the Arab Spring, in which the political capital accumulated at home was converted into symbolic capital to be spent in the region and vice versa, was jeopardised. The new strategy of reproduction contained some of the previous foreign policy discourses, thus allowing Erdoğan to claim the representation of the devout bourgeoisie (or, at least, of part of it). Moreover, the flight of members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood to Turkey after al-Sisi’s coup (Anadolu Agency, 2021), as well as of Syrian Islamists, allowed the AKP to exert major influence on the transnational group, strengthening its capacity to mobilise this network of political agents throughout the regional political space (as evidenced by the participation of the Syrian opposition to the anti-PYD operations between 2016 and 2019). However, the shrinking political capital possessed by the Brotherhood in the post-Arab Spring, and the nationalist aspects of the new strategy of accumulation of political capital of the AKP, raise doubts over the Turkish agents’ capacity to trigger a hegemonic field effect in the Middle East. Another issue to be considered is the composition of the new coalition, which includes political and social agents, such as the army, who have never built their political discourse against the Arab

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36 In December 2019, Davutoğlu formed a new political group, the Future Party (Gelecek Partisi). In March 2020, Ali Babacan, another high-profile member of the AKP and former Deputy Prime Minister, formed the Democracy and Progress Party (Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi). However, these defections have not yet affected the dominance of the People’s Alliance.
dictatorships or Israel. Thus, the future trajectory of Turkish foreign policy will also depend on the power relations, in terms of allocation of political capital, within the dominant camp.

5.2 The Iranian political field after the Arab Spring

The Iranian discourse during the Arab Spring, the so-called Islamic Awakening, proved to be disconnected from the political conditions of the wider Middle East and, in particular, of the changing Arab political fields affected by the uprisings. The quixotic aspect of the Iranian discourse, a product of an anti-imperialist principle of vision of political order, was the Iranian leadership’s claim to speak in the name of the uprisings. Such an act was rejected by the rising Islamist political agents, who, aiming to represent the religious bourgeoisie of their country and to present themselves as legitimate international actors to the Western (and American) audience, simply could not adopt the anti-imperialist principle as a political strategy. The awkwardness of this foreign policy practice emerged in an even clearer manner during the Syrian civil war, which forced Khamenei to drop the Islamic Awakening narrative and to describe the uprising as an American–Zionist plot. This turn of events did not mark the end of the anti-imperialist principle of vision. This political strategy is in fact an indispensable tool for preserving an orthodox configuration of the Iranian political field, especially by undermining discourses and initiatives that aim to promote a ‘democratisation’ of the political system by redefining the Guardianship of the Jurist. Therefore, the hysteresis was resolved by “opting out” from the struggle to redefine the post-Arab Spring political order, an option that allowed the Iranian regime to support that status quo in Syria and to preserve its strategy in the national political field.

The abandonment of the Islamic Awakening discourse was not the only effect of the Arab Spring in the strategies of accumulation of political capital in the Iranian political field. A careful look to the changing dynamics in the field and in particular to the tensions between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei offers a more nuanced understanding of how regional political space and national political fields interconnect. This aspect is discussed in the following subsection, which deals with the fall of the Iranian neoconservatives. However, the Arab Spring alone cannot explain the recent developments in the Iranian political field, namely the political (mis)fortunes of the Rouhani government. Therefore, to present a more complete account, the complex connections between the Iranian ‘anti-hegemonic political order’ and the political field of the global hegemon, the US, should be brought into the picture.
5.2.1 The fall of the neoconservatives

In Chapter 3, I mentioned how Ahmadinejad, contrary to the other conservatives in the field, and especially to Khamenei, “dared” to suggest that Assad should have engaged with the opposition and implement some reforms to resolve the situation in the country (MacFarquhar, 2011). According to a reformist newspaper, in another interview, the President of the Islamic Republic declared that the ‘people and government of Syria’ had to come to ‘an agreement on reforms’, adding that ‘the Syrian people must have the right to elections, freedom and justice […] and the West [should] not be allowed to intervene in its affairs’ (quoted in AlDosari, 2015, p. 66). The position of Ahmadinejad is in a certain sense a “third way” between the reformists and Khamenei. As demonstrated before, the latter entirely dismissed the Syrian uprising as an imperialist plot. On the other side, however, the reformists, in line with their democratic principle of vision, criticised the regime’s decision to support Bashar al-Assad. For instance, Mostafa Tajzadeh, a former official in the Khatami administration, declared that the Iranian regime became a ‘model for dictatorships’ by standing against the Syrian people and supporting the Baathist regime (Sabet, 2013, p. 14). Thus, Ahmadinejad’s position reflected in a certain way part of the heterodox reformist theme of “democratic legitimacy” while maintaining the neoconservative faction within the boundaries of the orthodox anti-imperialist discourse.

However, the different approach to the challenge of the Syrian uprising also reflected the discord between the Supreme Leader and the President (Al-Dorsari, 2015, p. 68) and therefore the struggle between traditional conservatives and neoconservatives. The object of this struggle was the interpretation of the concept of Guardianship of the Jurist, exactly as in the general case of the struggle between conservative (orthodox) positions and reformist (heterodox) positions. Like the reformists, Ahmadinejad also pushed for a less “literal” interpretation of the Guardianship of Jurist, in which elected institutions, especially the presidency, could occupy a more prominent role in the field. However, contrary to the reformists, the neoconservatives adopted different strategies of accumulating political capital. The reformist position reflected the position of its constituency (the urban secularised middle class, intellectuals, etc.) in other fields of Iranian society. These social positions would have benefited from a greater integration of the Iranian state into the global economy; accordingly, the reformists adopted a more moderate foreign policy discourse (the dialogue among civilisations) as a strategy of accumulation of political capital. On the contrary, neoconservative’s social “clients” consisted
of a coalition of state–military actors, such as the IRGC and lower classes (Ehteshami and Zweiri, 2007, pp. 59–63). This “allegiance” was reinforced by the fact that among the ranks of the neoconservatives were personalities with the same social background, starting with Ahmadinejad, who had been a member of the IRGC. Thus, adopting foreign policy discourses not in line with an anti-imperialist principle of vision was “unnatural” for the neoconservatives. Consequently, they had to rely to other discursive tools to mobilise political capital against Khamenei and the “traditionalists”. One of these tools was the invocation of the Mahdi, the 12th (Hidden) Imam of the Shia tradition and promised Messiah, to undermine, through a religious argument, the privileged position of Khamenei and of the office of the Supreme Leader in the political field (Yaluh, 2011; Hunter, 2014, pp. 220–221; AlDosari, 2015, pp. 61–68).

The confrontation between the two conservative factions led to the creation of another principle of vision and division in the Iranian political field. The neoconservatives elaborated their ideological standing in the field through the introduction of the so-called Iranian School of Thought, a vision of the world developed by Ahmadinejad loyalist Mashai that combined Islamist discourse, economic populism, Mahdism and the introduction of elements of Iranian “nationalism” (Hunter, 2014, pp. 224–226). On their part, the traditional conservatives remained committed to the most orthodox interpretation of the Guardianship of the Jurist, also known as Principlism, an ideology that claims to derive from the Imam Ali, and defined by Khamenei in 2002 as ‘recommended’ to all the governments (ibid, pp. 228–229). The struggle between these two positions in the political field offered a more interesting perspective for understanding Ahmadinejad’s call for a negotiated and democratic solution to the Syrian crisis. The Arab Spring and the eruption of a new wave of demonstrations in Iran between 2011 and 2012 seemed to create the discursive spaces to challenge the orthodox positions in the field. In this way, the neoconservatives, by adopting a democratic rhetoric, hoped to mobilise parts of the reformist constituency and accumulate political capital. However, Ahmadinejad did not possess enough democratic credibility to conduct this strategy. Moreover, the economic downturn caused by international isolation and sanctions following his hard-line approach to the nuclear issue led to a significant loss of prestige amongst large segments of the Iranian society. Eventually, at the end of his term, the Guardians Council rejected Mashai’s bid for the presidency, meaning that the neoconservatives were purged from the system (ibid, p. 226). These developments favoured Khamenei’s rapprochement with the modernist right and moderate reformists, thus paving the way for Rouhani’s election.
5.2.2 The limits of the Rouhani presidency in the political field

The rise of Rouhani to the presidency was enabled by two developments. The first was the neoconservatives’ above-mentioned fall from grace, with their struggle with Khamenei and the economic crisis. The second was a “moderation” of the Reformist position in the field, with Khatami distancing the group from the “excesses” of the 2009 Green Movement and reaffirming its commitment to the values of the Revolution (Hunter, 2014, pp. 230–231), thus confirming its position within the boundaries of the field’s doxa. Thus, in Summer 2013, Rouhani, a personality close to Rafsanjani, won the elections with the support of a coalition of moderate reformists and modernist conservatives. He rose to power with a platform of moderation and integration with world economics, however, as previously noted in Section 4.3.2, his capacity to influence Iranian position in Middle East political space was limited, as seen in the case of Syria in which the government could not really challenge the orthodox discourse promoted by Khamenei and the security apparatus. More difficult was the issue with the US and the nuclear question.

As noted by other authors, Iranian foreign policy is consistently affected by the regime’s anti-American predicament, which since 1979 has shaped a rejectionist, or even revisionist, attitude towards the pro-American regional order (see, for instance, Chubin, 2000; Warnaar, 2013; Juneau, 2015). As illustrated in Section 2.2.1, the political struggle occurred after the fall of the Shah regime made way for the absorption of anti-American discourse in the doxa of the political field of the Islamic Republic. For this reason, foreign policy makers, which are first of all political agents in the field, cannot easily justify a diplomatic engagement with the “Great Satan” without risking accusations of trespassing the “rules of the game”. The case of the nuclear issue was one exemplar in how certain position in the field can mobilise political capital with a tough stance against the US. In particular, the deployment of a political discourse of confrontation against American imperialism and the defence of national rights on the nuclear issue, in contrast with the “humiliating” concessions offered by the reformists, helped Ahmadinejad to enhance his prestige in the field (on Ahmadinejad and the nuclear issue, see Warnaar, 2013, pp. 137–152). However, the discourse associated with this strategy, although “appropriate” for the political field, resulted in international isolation and the imposition of sanctions. Nonetheless, at the beginning of the 2010s, new developments in the Iranian political field created the political space for agents willing to open real negotiations with the US and the
international community. The failure of the Islamic Awakening, the dire economic situation caused by sanctions and the political struggle between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei created enough political space for Rouhani’s attempt to open serious negotiations with the “Great Satan”.

The signing of the nuclear deal in July 2015 received an overall good reception in Iran and was even accepted by the Supreme Leader Khamenei (even if he made some reservations). Upon his return to Tehran the day after having reached an agreement on a framework deal on 2 April 2015, Mohammad Javad Zarif, Rouhani’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, was welcomed by a cheerful crowd. The same day, religious authorities exploited the Friday prayers to congratulate with the negotiating team. For instance, the leader of the Friday prayer in Tehran, and member of the Assembly of Experts, Mohammad Emami-Kashani, affirmed: ‘This framework is great and it is a victory for us as it made the Western world accept Iran’s right to pursue nuclear energy and technology’ (Al Arabiya, 2015; The New Arab, 2015). This recognition from religious authorities and, implicitly, from the Supreme Guide narrowed the conservative agents’ space of manoeuvre, whose position in the political field was compromised by the emergence of a more conciliatory foreign policy discourse towards the US. This aspect was interestingly grasped by Barack Obama, who noted that ‘those hardliners chanting “Death to America”’ were those ‘who have been most opposed to the deal’ (quoted in Stein, 2021, p. 194).

This comment leads us to a deeper analysis of the relationship between the Iranian and American political fields. As McCourt notes, American political hegemony, and hegemony in general, is assessed through the focus on ‘formation and decline of structural homologies between the American political field and other national fields of power’, which determines the impact of ‘the American political field on the principal divisions and forms of capital in other national fields of power’ (McCourt, 2021, p.15). The case of Iran is a complex one. On the one hand, the anti-American predicament of the Iranian political field could be seen as evidence of the lack of American influence. Nevertheless, the centrality of America as a theme in the Iranian universe of political discourse means that the American political field, through American foreign policy discourses, did play a role in shaping the distribution of political capital in the Iranian political field and field of power. The collapse of Khatami’s strategy based on democratic reformism and the dialogue among civilisations following Bush’s axis of evil speech is an example of this strange ‘reversed’ structural homology.
A similar dynamic can also be seen in the rise and fall of Rouhani. His strategy of accumulation of political capital worked until the American foreign policy discourses enabled a heterodox strategy. This was the case of the Obama administration, which was not just willing to negotiate (and make concessions) with Tehran but also provided a vision of regional order in which the Islamic Republic would no longer have been excluded. In an interview for The Atlantic, Obama stressed that both the Saudis and the Iranians ‘need to find an effective way to share the neighbourhood and institute some sort of cold peace’ (reported in Goldberg, 2016). These interactions cannot be considered through the Wendtian-constructivist idea of ‘alter casting’, according to which a nation state interacts with other state actors in a way to redefine their social identities (see Wendt, 1992). Such a perspective does not consider the power relations constraining the action of Rouhani government (and of Obama as well), which needed certain external conditions to break with the orthodox anti-American discourse in the field. These conditions ended when Donald Trump won the presidency after a campaign that reflected the Republican Party’s strong aversion to the Iran nuclear deal, as well the hostility towards the Islamic Republic that usually characterised conservative agents within the American political field.

The “revival” of an anti-Iranian rhetoric in the American foreign policy discourse was made clear from the beginning of the Republican administration. In his famous May 2017 speech held in Riyadh at the inauguration of the Global Center for Combating Extremism, Trump depicted Iran as the main source of ‘terrorism’ in the region: ‘From Lebanon to Iraq to Yemen, Iran funds, arms, and trains terrorists, militias, and other extremist groups that spread destruction and chaos across the region’ (reported in CNN, 2017). The anti-Iranian discourse escalated when Trump eventually fulfilled his electoral promise and unilaterally withdrew from the deal in May 2018. In the Iranian political discourse, this escalation resulted in an immediate loss of credibility towards the diplomatic option. Therefore, the reformist–moderate coalition, the political group that deployed this heterodox discourse, experienced a loss of political capital at the expense of the strenuous defenders of the orthodoxy, who criticised the deal and questioned the fact that Americans would have honoured it. Moreover, as Abdolmohammadi notes, ‘an inward-looking Trump, famous for his anti-immigration stance and his attacks on Muslims, will make it all too easy for conservatives in Iran to revive Ayatollah Khomeini’s rhetoric of the “Great Satan” […] that had been toned down in the past few years’ (Abdolmohammadi, 2016).
In addition to the loss of credibility of Rouhani’s principle of vision based on moderate reformism, the return of sanctions would have also been beneficial for agents associated with the political orthodoxy in other fields. For instance, the IRGC, which is also a considerable economic actor, would experience an enhancement of its position in the economic field, as demonstrated in the past. As Rizvi noted in 2012, although ‘tougher international sanctions would undoubtedly further damage Iran’s economy, […] the IRGC continues to prosper by hiking up the costs of its business contracts for new projects, to the detriment of their domestic and foreign business competitors’ (Rizvi, 2012, p. 594). Moreover, because of international sanctions, ‘foreign businesses are also unwilling or unable to enter into deals, so the IRGC faces less competition for winning new contracts’ (ibid.). In other words, as an effect of the ‘reversed’ structural homology, which ironically connected the Republicans and ‘hardliners chanting “Death to America”’ (Stein, 2021, p. 194), the heterodox position embodied by Rouhani’s administration lost political capital, thus favouring the return to power of the conservatives with the electoral victory of Ebrahim Raisi in 2021.

In conclusion, to assess the impact of the Arab Spring in the long-term strategies of accumulation in the Iranian political field, it is necessary to understand how the regional political space interrelates with the internal structure of opportunities for symbolic profit (paraphrasing Bourdieu, 1991b, p. 137). The encounter between the regional events, with the decline of the Islamic Awakening discourse and of the anti-imperialist principle of vision as a political product, and the difficult situation for the regime, with the power struggle between traditional conservatives and neoconservatives, created an opportunity for heterodox agents to re-enter the game. However, the coalition between the modernist right and moderate reformists had two types of constraints in adopting their strategy of accumulation within the field. The first is the position of Khamenei, and of security actors like the IRGC, in the production of foreign policy discourses. As I showed in the previous chapter, this hindered the initial attempt of the new government to reframe the Iranian position in the regional political space by promoting a negotiated solution to the Syrian crisis. The second is the situation of “reversed” structural homology between the Iranian political field and the American one. The anti-American and anti-imperialist doxa of the Iranian field ironically offered to the American foreign policy discourses the possibility to play a considerable influence in the distribution of political capital among the Iranian agents.
5.3 The rise of MBS and the Saudi nationalist principle of vision in the Saudi political field and in the Middle East

The “success” of the counterrevolution and the preservation of the structure political order were interestingly followed by a reorganisation of the Saudi political field. This turn of the events was in part a result of “natural” necessities, namely the succession to the throne following the death of King Abdullah in January 2015. This phase was particularly delicate for the royal family. According to the rules of the House of Saud, the succession is (or at least was) horizontal, thus the successor was to be found among the sons of Abdulaziz bin Saud. However, as the first generation of rulers was approaching their seventies and eighties, this became a source of problems, a point emphasised by the deaths of two Crown Princes, Minister of Defence Sultan and his brother Minister of Interior Nayef, between 2011 and 2012. To facilitate the transfer of power to the second generation (the grandsons of Abdul Aziz), King Abdullah created an Allegiance Council in 2006, an assembly composed of members of the royal family with the power to elect the Crown Prince and the Deputy Crown Prince. However, this expedient did not prevent the outbreak of palace wars of succession. After the death of Abdullah and the rise of Salman, factions within the royal family sought to remove from the line of succession the then-Crown Prince Muqrin, the youngest son of Abdul Aziz, and replace him with Muhammad bin Nayef (son of Nayef bin Abdul Aziz and his successor as Minister of Interior). At the same time, Mohammad bin Salman (MBS, King Salman’s son) was appointed Minister of Defence and Deputy Crown Prince.

These events marked a generational shift in the Saudi political field. At first glance, this would have ensured a certain continuity in the political field and in the relation between the political agents and their social clients. The King and his younger successors belong to the same branch of the royal family, the Sudairi, which is the one more closely associated with the religious establishment and the Islamist movements. Moreover, Salman is considered to have forged close personal relations with the Islamists during his tenure as Governor of Riyadh (Matthiesen, 2015, p. 1). Thus, the new developments in the Saudi field foreshadowed ‘a new realignment’ between the Saudi regime and Sunni Islamist forces (ibid, p. 9). As possible evidence of this strategy are certain declarations of the Saudi leadership and their foreign policy initiatives. For instance, Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal affirmed that the Saudi government did not have ‘any problem with the Muslim Brotherhood’ and opposed just a ‘small segment affiliated with the
group’ (see Stein, 2021, p. 203). Furthermore, the Kingdom launched an unprecedented military operation against the Shia Houthi militia in Yemen, which, in the meantime, had started a rebellion against the government led by Mansour Hadi and even seized the capital Sanaa. The intervention in Yemen received widespread support from the public and especially from the religious field. This also included pro-Muslim Brotherhood agents. For instance, the Sahwa cleric Salman al-Awdah supported the move, stressing the necessity to curb the Iranian influence (Stenslie, 2015, p. 2). The intervention eventually led the Saudis to develop ties with the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Islah, which supported the Hadi government and, then, the intervention of the Saudi-led coalition (Ottaway, 2015), although this cooperation entered into crisis in just few years (Middle East Eye, 2020). Thus reaction evidenced elements of continuity with the Saudi regime’s strategy of accumulation of political capital which succeeded in partially appeasing the Islamist internal contestation, while maintaining its monopoly of political capital.

However, this strategy did not last long. With the deposition of Mohammad bin Nayef and the rise of MBS, the political field and the field of power experienced a restructuring since this succession opened and emboldened a new position in the Saudi political field. Although MBS belongs to the Sudairi branch of the royal family, his political actions and discourses are distant from those of his father and his father’s brothers (such as Prince Nayef), which have been characterised as pro-religion and socially conservative stances. Since his rise to power, the Prince has promoted a series of social and cultural reforms, such as allowing women to drive, reopening cinemas and restricting the power of the religious police. However, these reforms did not pave the way for an opening of the political field’s boundaries. In fact, the rise of MBS led to a recurrence of authoritarianism in the Kingdom with the arrests of several activists. The adoption of this new political discourse in the field are in part a response to the Arab Spring. As Masoud argues, ‘[i]n the years since the Arab Spring, the region’s autocrats have transformed themselves (or at least their reputations) from stolid defenders of an unpleasant status quo to agents of much needed change’ (Masoud, 2021, p. 140). In other words, the Arab Spring paved the way for new actors within the Middle East regional space, including al-Sisi, Mohammed bin Zayed (UAE Crown Prince and de facto ruler) and MBS to deploy a new political discourse to mobilise new social actors behind the “old political order”. In the case of MBS, the new political discourse is associated with the economic programme called Vision 2030, through which he hopes to transform the Saudi economy by reducing the weight of oil and oil rent, introducing taxes and promoting foreign investment and privatisation. In other
words, the plan aims at restructuring the Saudi mode of accumulation of economic capital, from a ‘rentier regime of accumulation’ to a proper capitalist one (Faudot, 2019).

From this context, we can understand MBS’s position in the field as an attempt to channel the demands of those social agents expected to be the beneficiaries of this economic strategy, especially the rising urban middle class and the youth, into the existing political order. In other words, to represent them, while dispossessing them of the means of production of political goods, this was a move that was seen as necessary given the recent challenge represented by the Arab Spring to the royal family’s monopoly on political capital. To mobilise these segments of Saudi society, MBS deployed a new principle of vision and division in the Saudi political field: Saudi nationalism. This new political discourse aimed to redefine Saudi identity from a religious one to a narrow-nationalist type, as Al-Rasheed notes:

*The newly celebrated citizen is no longer the one who obeys the religious clerics and is rewarded by the distribution of state sponsored prizes for religious observance and zeal, but the eclectic and creative young entrepreneur and propagandist for the regime. He is expected to not only celebrate and swear allegiance to the crown prince, but also rush to buy newly issued shares in the oil company Aramco* (Al-Rasheed, 2020).

The principle of Saudi nationalism led to a partial rupture with the traditional political discourse. An example of this is the revaluation of Saudi Arabia’s pre-Islamic past (ibid.; Mabon, 2018, p. 57). However, a more important aspect is MBS’s active anti-Islamist rhetoric, which seeks to devalue the religious capital within the field of power, thus affecting the mobilising potential of Islamic discourse and, accordingly, the risk associated with political Islam. This rhetoric was supplemented by a crackdown against members of the religious fields, dozens of whom were arrested on charges of espionage and having links with the Muslim Brotherhood (Mabon, 2018, p. 57). Among the arrested was the prominent *Sahwa* cleric Salman al-Awda, who refused to support the blockade against Qatar (Reuters, 2017). This return to repression against religious personalities, although marking the end of the short-term rapprochement between the Islamists and the Saudi royal family, did not represent an element of change in terms of the normal strategies of preserving the monopoly on political capital. Nevertheless, MBS’s discourse towards the religious field was consistently different from the one adopted by the other positions in the Saudi political field.
Traditionally, the political discourse of exclusion towards the Muslim Brotherhood and Shia groups included homologous strategies with the dominant group in the field of production of religious goods. In particular, the “Sudairi seven”, the faction to which MBS’s father King Salman belongs, has always sought to develop its discourse to empower their allies in the religious field, namely the Wahhabi clergy. This strategy has characterised the position of this agent in the Saudi political field. On his part, MBS occupied a different position in the field, as demonstrated by a discourse based on a “return” to a more moderate form of religiosity. In a speech directed to potential foreign investors delivered in October 2017, the young Prince, while stating that the young Saudi society ‘won’t waste 30 years […] combating extremist thoughts’ (reported in Sameer, 2017), also presented an interesting perspective on his vision of the relations between religion and society. Interestingly, he “absolved” Saudi Wahhabi tradition of creating these ‘extremist ideas’, ascribing the ‘social-conservative’ turn to a reaction to the 1979 Iranian revolution and subsequent Islamic revival. Before then, the Prince argued, Saudi Arabia was ‘a country of moderate Islam that is open to all religions, traditions and people around the globe’ (ibid.). This picture of the pre-1979 Saudi Arabia is questionable.

However, the utterances deployed by the Prince should be read as a part of a strategy of devaluing religious capital in the field of power. This strategy might be seen as necessary given the subversive potential demonstrated by the religious discourse during the Arab Spring. However, at the same time, it risked fuelling forms of resistance in both the political and religious fields. Against a possible religious opposition, MBS had no problem to declare the intention to ‘crack down on members of the ulama who opposed his reform agenda’ (Mabon, 2018, p. 57, italics in the original). Soon he also took a series of measures. These included repression against reformist and pro-Muslim Brotherhood actors, threats against the conservative Wahhabi clergy and the promotion of young like-minded clerics within the religious field, such as Muhammad Al-Issa, who has been appointed Secretary of the World Muslim League in 2016 (Lacroix, 2019, p. 98). These actions cannot not be considered as part of a homologous strategy between two different dominant groups, since they undermined the authority of the religious elites. Rather, they aimed at the submission of the religious field to the political one and to the gradual replacement of religious capital with a new source of symbolic legitimation, namely a new form of nationalism.

MBS’s political discourse has also an international dimension, which helped it to mobilise capital both in the national political field and in the international market of political ideas. Part of this dimension is clearly the Arab Spring, with its sense of urgency in restructuring the Saudi
political field and field of power to make them immune to the circulation of other principles of vision – such as the AKP’s democratic-religious and the Iranian anti-imperialist ones – as well as from the action of the potential recipient of these principles (the “importers”) like the Muslim Brotherhood or the *Sahwa*. However, the Arab Spring, although it helps in grasping the discourses of the Saudi political agents both in the national field and in the international political space, cannot fully explain the accumulation of political and symbolic capital necessary to acquire the domestic and the international success of MBS’s “nationalist principle of vision”. Thus, it is necessary to appreciate the role of the international strategies adopted by the Prince to increase his prestige. Among them was the acquisition of Western expertise in the form of consultancy (see Masoud, 2021, p. 140), as well as of co-opting agents in the transnational field of cultural production. Thus, from 2017, Western media experienced a proliferation of articles promoting MBS as the reformer the Arab world needed and the Vision 2030 as the ‘Saudi spring’ (see, for instance, Friedman, 2017; Ross, 2018). A part of these international strategies was the support of the Trump administration, which assured that American foreign policy would have fostered MBS’s strategy of reproduction (a support that was maintained even in the wake of the shock following the murder of Jamal Khashoggi).

As a result of adopting a nationalist principle, foreign policy discourses in the MBS era were marked by a strong anti-Iranian (and anti-Turkish) foreign policy discourse, as well as by the bold move to isolate Qatar by imposing a blockade on the country in coordination with UAE, Bahrain and Egypt on 5 June 2017. This move against Qatar demonstrated that the doxic battle over the regional order, as well as the strategy aimed at delegitimising and excluding the democratic-religious principle from the universe of the political discourse in the Middle East, remains a central feature of regional politics. Although Qatar is not a democratic country, it had a role in encouraging the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood during the Arab Spring, especially through Al Jazeera. Therefore, when Saudi Arabia declared the blockade by quoting the country’s “support of terrorism”, the reference to the Muslim Brotherhood was clear. The connection between the move and the struggle over the right principle of vision and division in the Middle East political space is even more evident if we look at the list of 13 demands forwarded to Doha. According to the list, Qatar should have curbed diplomatic ties with Iran and closed a recently opened Turkish military base in the Peninsula. Moreover, the

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Al-Thani regime was also asked to shut down Al Jazeera, stop interfering in sovereign countries’ internal affairs, cease contact with political opposition in Gulf countries and ‘sever ties to all “terrorist, sectarian and ideological organisations,” specifically the Muslim Brotherhood, ISIL, al-Qaeda, Fateh al-Sham and Lebanon’s Hezbollah’ (Al Jazeera, 2017; see also Gulf News, 2017).

With this move, Qatar became the catalyst of a sort of an “axis of terrorism” that linked Iran (and proxies), al-Qaeda, ISIS, the Muslim Brotherhood and Turkey. MBS made clear this image on different occasions. For instance, during a meeting with Egyptian journalists, he described Iran, Turkey and ‘hard-line Islamist groups’ as a part of a ‘triangle of evil’ (reported in Reuters, 2018). The anti-Qatari blockade, although an escalation, was clearly in continuity with the strategy adopted by the Saudi political elite to maintain its position within both the field of power and the regional political space during the Arab Spring. A similar measure was taken in 2014, when the Saudis (alongside the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt) withdrew their ambassadors from Doha. However, with the signing of the nuclear deal, the action was momentarily slowed down to invest diplomatic capital in opposing a US–Iran rapprochement. Nevertheless, when this perspective collapsed after the election of Donald Trump, the Saudi-led conservative coalition had the opportunity to openly resume its strategy. Moreover, this time, the American regional discourse favoured the coalition. Despite American interests in Qatar, especially in the presence of the strategically important Al Udeid Air Base, Trump initially endorsed the blockade. More importantly, he did this by echoing the position of the Saudis. For instance, he said that the move could have been ‘the beginning of the end to the horror of terrorism!’ (Trump, 2020, quoted in Mabon, 2018, p. 63).

The assertive foreign policy against the Muslim Brotherhood, its backers and Iran is also a way to mobilise the population behind the nationalist rebranding of the Saudi identity, which was the main endeavour of MBS’s new principle of vision. An example of this is the military intervention in Yemen. Although it also served to strengthen the Sunni religious credentials of the Kingdom, the intervention was also accompanied by a surge of nationalist sentiments among the population (Al-Rasheed, 2015; McDowall, 2015). This mobilisation, which saw the government-sponsored celebration of MBS as ‘commander in chief’ (Stenslie, 2015, pp. 1–2), guaranteed an accumulation of political capital for the Prince and, thus, an enhancement of his position in the political field. At the same time, the foreign policy discourse produced within the new nationalist principle is not meant to dissolve, or overcome, the authoritarian doxa of the Saudi political field. Rather, it can be considered a sort of “upgrade” of this model.
Therefore, under the dominance of MBS, the Saudi agents did not abandon the regional “symbolic” competition against the Iranian and Turkish political agents. On the contrary, in a certain sense it escalated this hostility in a bid to mark a definitive triumph of the Saudi political field in the symbolic struggle for the post-Arab Spring Middle East.

5.4 Conclusions: The regional political space after the Arab Spring

The purpose of the chapter was to explain the evolution of the strategies of accumulation of political capital in the Turkish, Iranian and Saudi political fields after the Arab Spring. The evolution of the fields under consideration demonstrated the impact of the regional dynamics in reshaping internal power struggles, although this process depends on various factors, including the capacity of certain political agencies to mobilise the capital in their possession.

In the case of the Arab Spring, we can find different scenarios. Both in Turkey and Iran, the political agents experienced a devaluation of their capital following the failure to impose their respective principles of vision in the regional political space. The effects of this failure depended on the political investment of those agents. In the Turkish case, the unsuccessful attempt to unite the Middle East regional space under the ‘democratic-religious’ principle through its homology with the Muslim Brotherhood was a considerable political debacle for the AKP. As a result, the party’s position in the political field was questioned. Moreover, Erdoğan’s legitimacy as the main representative of the party and of the devout bourgeoisie was subjected to multiple contestations. To preserve his position and mobilise political capital, he transformed the party’s habitus and adopted a new religious-nationalist principle of vision. In the Iranian case, the engagement with the Arab Spring and with the Arab Islamist agents resulted in a case of hysteresis. Although this outcome hindered the export of an Iranian model of anti-imperialist politics, it also prevented the Iranian political field from being particularly affected by the collapse of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Thus, the effects of the Arab Spring on Iranian political struggle are evident when the outbreak of the Syrian uprising forced an adjustment of the conservative discourse without stepping out of the anti-imperialist discourse that characterised this position.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, the political agents were able to prevent a devaluation of their political capital and to preserve a favourable configuration of the regional political discourse. Nevertheless, the Arab Spring further demonstrated the subversive potential of religious discourses, thus creating space of manoeuvre for new heterodox positions in the Saudi political
field. In this context, MBS exploited this space and intervened by adopting a nationalist principle of vision, which sought to mobilise new segments of the population and to devaluate religious capital within the field of power. In a certain sense, this development marked MBS’s alignment with other agents in the regional political space, such as al-Sisi and Mohammed bin Zayed, therefore paving the way for a new regional coalitions of authoritarian anti-Islamist political agents. This new principle of vision is reflected by a more aggressive foreign policy discourse, which is functional to the accumulation of prestige of the new position in the political field.

In conclusion, a Bourdieu-inspired field-theoretical approach offers precious insight into the evolution of Middle East regional dynamics after the Arab Spring. This understanding goes beyond a bottom-up reading according to which domestic politics affects foreign policy, which in turn shapes regional politics. Bourdieu helps us to draw a more relational and complex picture, in which the circulation of political discourses reinforced (or weakened) concepts, categories, power resources and positions throughout the entire regional political space, including in the individual national political fields. This process does not necessarily lead to changes in internal political struggles, but it creates the conditions of possibility for certain agents to exploit the international dynamics to mobilise new forms of capital. This is demonstrated especially in the case of Erdoğan’s and MBS’s new principles of vision. Although the Arab Spring was not the sole factor behind this enterprise, how these agents internalised the regional events contributed to the evolutions of the strategies of accumulation in their respective political fields. In turn, these new strategies reshaped regional politics, as demonstrated by the new military posture taken by Turkey in Syria and by Saudi Arabia’s more aggressive foreign policy. Therefore, this approach to international politics offers a nuanced understanding of the relations between internal political struggles, foreign policy and the international realm.
Conclusions

On 25 July 2021, after months of political turmoil and years of economic stagnation, exacerbated by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, Tunisian President Kais Saied dismissed the Prime Minister and suspended the parliament. This move was justified by the necessity of addressing the economic crisis and corruption, but this was condemned as a coup by Ennahda. As Tunisian democracy was suffering its worst crisis, political agents in Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran reacted to the events by deploying discourses that resembled those adopted throughout the Arab Spring. The Turkish government supported the position of Ennahda and condemned the development as a “coup”. A spokesperson of the AKP stressed that ‘Turkey stands by the Tunisian people and respects the struggle for democracy’, also emphasising Erdoğan’s stance in support for democracy in Tunis (Sevencan, 2021). The reactions from Riyadh were completely different. The first official response from the regime was to affirm its ‘confidence’ in the Tunisian leadership and its ‘support for security and stability’ (Al Arabiya, 2021), while pro-government media in the Kingdom and in the UAE hailed Saied as the man who ‘saved’ Tunisia from the Muslim Brotherhood (see Cafiero, 2021). In the meantime, the reactions from Tehran were limited to a call for restraint by all parties (Tehran Times, 2021). In sum, the attitudes of these agents reflected the dynamics seen during the symbolic struggle for the Arab Spring. The AKP mobilised its capital in defence of the position of Ennahda in the Tunisian political field. In doing so, it adopted a discourse based on democratic legitimacy. Such a mobilisation was neither possible nor desirable for the Iranians. Setting aside the fact that the Islamic Republic was experiencing a change of government (with the conservative Ebrahim Raisi replacing Hassan Rouhani), the Iranian political agents did not possess the necessary symbolic capital to influence the struggle. Moreover, since the Tunisian political field rejected the Iranian anti-imperialist discourse, the Iranian players did not have a real political stake in that part of the game. Finally, in supporting Saied’s actions, the Saudi agents deployed the two mottos that characterised the authoritarian principle of vision: “security” and “stability”.

It seems interesting that, despite the changes occurring in the political fields of these three case studies, certain practices and discourses have persisted. However, this is consistent with the evolution described in the previous chapter. Despite the authoritarian turn and the rise of the religious-nationalist principle of vision in the Turkish political field, Erdoğan has preserved
some features of his former pro-democratic discourse to mobilise his core constituency. The support for the Muslim Brotherhood and for “democratic” government practices in the Middle East is one of these aspects of continuity, as the cases for Tunisia and for Turkish reluctance in re-establishing official relations with Cairo and Damascus (just to cite a few) have demonstrated. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the persistence of this trajectory will depend on power relations within the Turkish political field, and, in particular, within the dominant coalition that expresses the nationalist-religious principle. In recent months, as a result of the current economic crisis, the “stock” of political capital of Erdoğan’s AKP is in decline, thus paving the way for changes in the group’s strategies of accumulation of political capital (also considering the decline of Muslim Brotherhood and political Islam in the regional political space). At the same time, the rise of MBS and of a nationalist principle in the Saudi political fields led to even greater hostility towards political Islam. Thus, although Riyadh has eventually agreed to end the blockade against Qatar, the position of the Saudi political agents towards the Brotherhood in the regional political space has remained the same. As far as the Iranian political agents are concerned, since the failure of the Islamic Awakening, they have had a modest involvement in the symbolic struggle for the dominating vision of political order in the Middle East.

Therefore, so far, the situation in the region regarding the “soft” coup in Tunisia seems to signal that the symbolic struggle for the Arab Spring is not yet over. This emphasises the relevance of the thesis, which sought to revisit the relationship between national political struggles and foreign policy in the Middle East after the outbreak of the Arab Spring, a task that was fulfilled through a Bourdieusian field-theoretical approach. As a proposal for a viable theoretical framework to understand the impact of internal power struggles on discursive dynamics at the international levels, this approach builds on Bourdieu’s concept of political field and on his understanding of the international space to demonstrate how foreign policy discourses serve both as tools for accumulating political capital at home and as vehicle for exporting a certain vision of political order in the region. Through these analytical lenses, the competition between the three political “models” in the Middle East – namely the Turkish, Iranian and Saudi models – is reconceptualised as a doxic battle for the imposition of the different principles of vision and division on the post-revolutionary Arab political fields. In this final chapter, I draw the conclusions of this work. In doing so, I present the findings, which relate to the twofold contribution that the thesis hoped to achieve. Then, I propose some potential venues for future research on Middle East politics based on Bourdieu’s theory.
Key findings

In the past decades, this Middle East has attracted the attention of media and researchers all over the world. The balance of power is fluid, state borders are fragile and national identities are being contested. Thus, the necessity to theorise regional order and states’ foreign policy in the Middle East has been a stimulating challenge for IR scholars, making the region a potential “laboratory” for testing the alleged universality of IR theories or for elaborating new approaches (see Valbjørn, 2015). This debate has been enriched by the outbreak of the Arab Spring, which strongly questions state–society relations and the status quo in the regional system. Through an analysis of foreign policies of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia surrounding the regional upheaval, this thesis contributes to the debate on the Arab Spring by offering a field-theoretical account that explains how internal political struggles in these countries influences their behaviour and reshape regional politics. Through the lens of Bourdieu’s relational sociology, it deconstructs the foreign policy discourses of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia, thus unveiling the relationship between national configurations of political power and the reshaping of the Middle East. Chapters 1 and 2 laid the basis for this analysis.

Chapter 1 offered an in-depth discussion of the theoretical framework. After presenting the core concepts of Bourdieu’s field theory (field, habitus, doxa, capital), it introduced the political field as an analytical tool for understanding the national political struggles and the emergence of different visions of the social world. This chapter also introduced the conceptualisation of the international realm that underpins the research. This conceptualisation follows Bourdieu’s works on the international circulation of ideas, as well as a Bourdieu-inspired scholarship, which is interested in the role of domestic struggles and negotiations in the flow of ideas, strategies and capital from one national field to another. Accordingly, this thesis does not regard Middle East politics as a vast transnational (or international) field. Rather, regional discursive dynamics are seen as an international political space where discourses and ideas circulate among different national fields. Therefore, the regional symbolic struggle is framed as a competition among different principles of vision and division. These are the products of the particular histories, political conditions and power struggles in the national political fields. Therefore, the discourses and ideational constructs deployed in foreign policy are not just factors influencing decision makers, nor rhetorical arms used to achieve more influence in international affairs. Rather, they ‘are also themselves stakes of a struggle’
(Bourdieu, 1999, p. 225). Finally, Chapter 1 also discussed the Bourdieusian understanding of dynamics of change and continuity, thus paving the way for introducing the concept of doxic battle as a lens through which to understand the complex political conjuncture represented by the Arab Spring. In this case, the changes occurred in other political fields in the Middle East, offering the possibility to impose new principles of vision in the regional political space while challenging old visions of political order. In this scenario, the impact of internal political struggle on regional politics is explained by the double game played by political agents, who play the regional game with the same symbolic resources acquired in the national field. Therefore, I have argued that foreign policy, through the deployment of discourses produced in the political field, served both to accumulate prestige at home and to convert this increasing political capital into symbolic power abroad.

Through an analysis of the genesis and composition of the political fields of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia, Chapter 2 deconstructed the models discourse. First, it argued that the logic behind the production of the foreign policy discourse – usually referred to as the ‘Turkish model’ – is the same that regulates the AKP’s strategy of accumulation of political capital. This strategy can be described as the adoption of a democratic-religious principle, which resulted from the habitus that the AKP developed throughout its participation in the struggle in the national political field. Second, this chapter reconsidered the Iranian foreign policy discourse in light of the political conditions leading to the formation of the Islamic Republic’s political field and of the conflict between orthodox and heterodox positions. In this way, it connected different visions of the political order in the Iranian political field to foreign policy discourses. Therefore, the initial support of the Arab Spring through the Islamic Awakening discourse, as well as the promotion of the Iranian model of resistance to American hegemony, is understood as part of an anti-imperialist principle of vision and division deployed by a coalition of conservative actors to preserve an orthodox configuration of the field. Third, through an analysis of the Saudi social universe, this chapter argued that the most relevant power struggle in the Kingdom was not the one between the different positions in the political field, but, rather, the one situated in the field of power between holders of political capital and holders of religious capital. In this struggle, holders of religious capital exploited external events (including the outbreak of the Arab Spring) to question the existing socio-political order. Thus, foreign policy discourses that refer to stability and to support for authoritarian regimes are understood as strategies through which the Saudi political agents preserve the boundaries of
the political field and, consequently, their monopoly over the means of production of political goods.

In summary, by deconstructing foreign policy discourses through the lens of Bourdieu’s political field, Chapter 2 shed light on the roots of national political power and on the mechanisms through which regional dynamics can embolden or threat them. In this view, foreign policy becomes a strategy for accumulating political capital at home. The symbolic struggle for the Arab Spring is thus explained through the relations between these conflicting principles, namely the AKP’s religious-democratic principle, the Iranian orthodox ‘anti-imperialist principle’ and the Saudi authoritarian principle. The reproduction of these competing visions of the regional order serve the interests of the political agents in their national political field as well as their accumulation of symbolic capital in the regional political space. The analysis of the struggle unfolded in Chapters 3 and 4. The former dealt with the competing attempts by the AKP and the Iranian regime to impose a new principle of legitimate domination in the changing political fields in the Arab world. The latter analysed the causes and effects of the Saudi-led counterrevolution.

Chapter 3 reconceptualised the Turkish–Iranian competition through the Bourdieusian theoretical lenses previously described. It demonstrated that the responses of the AKP and the Iranian conservatives were “filtered” by the practical necessities in their respective national political fields. Therefore, foreign policy discourses are part of the agents’ strategies of accumulation of political capital in their national political fields. It follows that the international position of an agent reflects its position in the national field. The AKP’s support for democratisation reflects the democratic-religious principle of vision deployed at home. Similarly, the Islamic Awakening discourse deployed by Khamenei and Ahmadinejad reflects their dispositions in the Iranian political field, in which they deployed an anti-imperialist principle of vision. The chapter further argued that the competition, conceptualised as a doxic battle, was a struggle to impose a dominating principle of vision and division on the post-revolutionary Arab fields. In this case, the AKP’s political investment in the Muslim Brotherhood is explained both by the dispositions that the party developed in the national political field and by the dynamics of circulation of political discourses in the Middle East political space. The homologies of positions and dispositions between Erdoğan’s party and the rising Islamist political groups in the region favoured the transmission of the democratic-religious principle from the Turkish political field to the Arab ones, although this process occurred through a series of operations of de-contextualisation, selection and re-adaptation in
the fields of reception. Such an export–import process was not possible in the case of the Iranian anti-imperialist principle, since regional political discourse tended to give more value to democratic credentials as a form of political legitimation. Thus, the Iranian attempt to impose their anti-imperialist principle resulted in hysteresis. The position of the Iranian conservatives towards the Syrian uprising emphasised their quixotic practices, eventually resulting in the abandonment of this strategy of accumulation. In sum, the competition between the Turkish and Iranian “models” at the beginning of the Arab Spring resulted from the strategies of accumulation adopted by the AKP and by the Iranian conservatives, respectively. In the wake of the regional upheaval, these agents saw in the possibility of exporting their form of political capital an opportunity to enhance their position in their national political field amongst competing political narratives.

On its part, the Saudi regime saw in the Arab Spring a threat to its monopoly on political capital at home as well as to its position in the national field of power. Chapter 4 demonstrated this. By analysing the impact of the July 2013 coup in Egypt on Middle East politics, I showed how Saudi animosity towards the Muslim Brotherhood is explained through the authoritarian and monarchical principle of vision and division of the Saudi political field. Specifically, what concerned the Saudi political agents was the possibility that the diffusion of a democratic-religious principle, embodied by the AKP and, in the Arab world, by the Brotherhood, would have empowered those social actors who sought to promote a new vision of political order. Hence, rather than being based on “national interest” or “state identity”, Saudi support for the coup is explained through the logic of the double game, according to which the dismissal of political Islam in the regional political space reinforces the regime’s position in the national field of power. For the AKP, and for its leader Erdoğan, the Egyptian coup came as both a challenge and an opportunity. If the collapse of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was a visible failure of the AKP’s attempt to import the democratic-religious principle in the regional political space, the condemnation of the coup became a useful discursive tool to preserve Erdoğan’s position in the political field, thus temporarily recovering from the Gezi Park crisis. This demonstrates how foreign policy discourses can be deployed to reproduce the strategies of accumulation of political capital.

These findings were verified through the analysis of Turkish, Iranian and Saudi discourses surrounding the Syrian crisis. Through a Bourdieusian analysis of the historical conditions of the different national political and religious fields, Chapter 4 developed an understanding of regional dynamics that goes beyond explanations based on the Sunni/Shia divide or the Saudi–
Iranian proxy war. For political agents, foreign policy discourses, as well as the deployment of sectarian themes, functioned as tools for imposing onto the civil war a “meaning” in line with their position in the national political field. Thus, in the case of the Saudi regime, supporting the rebellion was not just motivated by the aim of overthrowing the Alawite (or the Iranian-backed) Bashar al-Assad, an aim that would have required far greater cooperation with Turkey and with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, something the Saudi regime was unwilling to do. Behind this decision was a strategy of preserving the Saudi political field. Accordingly, the deployment of sectarian discourses, which were favoured by the doxa of the religious field, served the purpose of depriving democratic discourses of their mobilising potential, thus affecting the capacity of reformist social agents to exploit the Syrian rebellion to accumulate symbolic capital at the expense of the political and religious dominant groups. In the case of Iran, supporting the regime was a contested move in the political field. Both reformists and modernist conservatives, and even in a certain sense Ahmadinejad, advanced the idea of promoting a compromise between Damascus and the rebels to preserve some democratic credentials for the Iranian position in the Middle East political space. However, Khamenei and traditional conservatives successfully pushed for firm support for the regime based on the anti-imperialist principle of vision that informed their position in the national political field. Accordingly, they mobilised national and regional constituencies through the deployment of a discourse built around the rebel–Daesh–American imperialist nexus. Finally, in the case of the AKP, this thesis argued that the only “role” played by sectarianism was to discredit the political opposition’s stance over the Syria policy.

In sum, Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 draw an interesting picture regarding the relationship between internal political struggle and regional politics. This is not a bottom-up dynamic wherein the practical necessities of the political field create foreign policy, which in turn shapes regional politics. Rather, as the regional symbolic struggle demonstrates, a more complex dynamic is at work. The circulation of discourses, concepts and political models, also made through foreign policy, has a profound effect on struggles in the field of production. As political agents use foreign policy discourses, or discourses related to international events, for internal political struggles, external dynamics become somehow entrenched in their positions in the field. In other words, the international becomes a perpetual presence in the domestic political struggle. Thus, the promotion of the ‘Turkish model’ through foreign policy discourses connected the AKP’s strategy of accumulation of political capital to that of the Muslim Brotherhood. Accordingly, the latter borrowed the capital of the former to enhance its own democratic
credentials, while the AKP exploited the reproduction of its model in the region to increase its prestige at home. As the Arab Spring was crushed by counterrevolution and increasing sectarianism, Erdoğan’s party was forced to re-elaborate its political message to mobilise support, with great consequences in the Turkish political field. A similar process can be seen in the Iranian political field. The fact that the Arab Spring did not “evolve” into an Islamic Awakening, and the threat to the “resistance model” represented by the Syrian uprising, have completely changed Iranian political agents’ strategies of reproduction. Specifically, the orthodox positions had to reinvent their foreign policy discourse to preserve their political authority in this area of the field, thus constraining the space of manoeuvre of reformists and moderates. In the case of Saudi Arabia, foreign policy discourses were not only externalisations of ideologies and principles of domestic visions but also internalisations of international events. In other words, support for al-Sisi and for the Syrian rebels served to discredit and downsize those social agents who challenged the regime’s monopoly on the reproduction of the legitimate principle of vision of the political order. Therefore, the symbolic struggle over the Arab Spring demonstrates that regional politics is not just shaped by internal dynamics but that it can also change them.

Chapter 5 further demonstrated this point by providing an overview of the evolution of the strategies of accumulation of political capital in the Turkish, Iranian and Saudi political fields after the Arab Spring. It concluded that the impact of the symbolic struggle on these strategies has been complex and multifaceted, depending on how these events have interrelated with the national political fields, with other international dynamics and with the position of certain political agents both in the national and the regional realm. In the case of the AKP, the chapter argued that, to appreciate the impact of its unsuccessful attempt to export its principle of vision to the other political fields, we must consider how the doxic battle has intertwined with other developments. These include the opening of divisions among the political group after Gezi Park (namely between Erdoğan and the ‘liberal faction’ of the AKP) and the mobilisation of Kurdish nationalism both in Syria (with the PYD/YPG) and in the national political field (HDP). As a result, the party’s position in the political field has experienced a reconfiguration characterised by the adoption of the religious-nationalist principle of vision, which allowed Erdoğan to preserve his position within the field. In the Iranian case, the most immediate effect of the Arab Spring was the abandonment of the ‘Islamic Awakening’ discourse. Regarding the internal power struggle, the doxic battle, and in particular the stances over Syria, emphasised the division within the political field, which, during the second term of Ahmadinejad’s
presidency, experienced a struggle between traditional conservatives and neoconservatives. This eventually paved the way for the rise to government of a new “centrist” coalition, represented by Rouhani. However, the space of manoeuvre of this coalition within the field was constrained by the structural conditions of the field itself. On the one hand, Khamenei and the IRGC have successfully monopolised the production of foreign policy discourses regarding the Syrian crisis. On the other hand, the situation of ‘reversed’ structural homology between the Iranian political field and the American one made Rouhani’s capacity to accumulate symbolic profits from international strategies dependent on American foreign policy, as this thesis demonstrated in the cases of both Khatami–Bush and Rouhani–Trump. Finally, in the Saudi case, the Arab Spring was one of the factors that enabled the rise of the nationalist principle of vision, embodied by MBS. This new strategy of accumulating political capital was accompanied by an attempt to devaluate religious capital in the field of power, as well as by aggressive foreign policy discourses against the other “competitors” in the Middle East market of political ideas.

In conclusion, by reconceptualising Turkish, Iranian and Saudi foreign policies during the Arab Spring through the lens of Bourdieu’s field theory, this thesis made two main claims. First, through a deconstruction of the discourses underpinning the regional politics of these three states, the thesis argued that foreign policy reflects the position of dominant political agents within their national political fields. In this way, it is possible to unveil the mechanism through which the configuration of domestic political struggles reshares international dynamics. The empirical analysis demonstrated this point. As the competition for the Arab Spring focused on redefining principles of governance through the regional political space, foreign policy makers in Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia responded by mobilising symbolic resources that were the products of their own historical experiences. In doing so, they played a double game, in which increasing their prestige in the region went hand in hand with the enhancement of their power positions at home. Second, the thesis assessed the influence of the regional uprising in the strategies of reproduction of dominant political groups. This enables a broader theoretical claim on the complex relationship between external and internal developments in patterns of change and continuity. In this case, the empirical analysis demonstrated that the symbolic struggle for the Arab Spring played an important role in reshaping the strategies of accumulation in the three case studies, although the direction of this change depended both on the agency of individual political actors and on other international dynamics. What emerges is a complex and multifaceted relationship between the international and national realms, in which it is not
simply domestic politics driving international politics. Rather, it is a combination of the two configurations that assures the success of the strategies of accumulation of political capital of political agents.

Future research

Overall, this thesis offered a Bourdieusian approach to the study of regional politics in the Middle East, as well as to the study of the relationship between the national production of political and foreign policy discourse and international struggles. A possible avenue for future research would be to apply this approach to other case studies. These can be both other relevant regional actors, such as the UAE’s regime or, although we cannot say that it was competing for imposing a model, Israel’s Likud, or to other cases beyond the Arab Spring and the Middle East. A good example would be the Cold War, in which US–Soviet competition can be reconsidered not just through the lens of a neorealist style of realpolitik, but also by considering the struggle for the circulation of political ideas and models of governance.

An alternative proposal would be to focus on the further contribution that Bourdieu’s field theory can provide to the study of the international politics of the Middle East. Drawing upon the findings of this thesis, as well as upon the works of Dezalay, Garth, Nexon, Neumann and McCourt, it would be possible to develop a new research agenda on the relations between different national fields in regional politics. This agenda would have three possible avenues. First, it would enable further investigation on the ideological alignment between the different political fields and fields of power during the Arab Spring and beyond. This would offer, for instance, a nuanced perspective on intra-Gulf relations. An example of this would be an analysis of the relations between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, especially in light of the similarities between MBS’s nationalist principle of vision and the political discourse in Abu Dhabi under the leadership of Mohammad bin Zayed. A second possible path would be to re-examine the dynamics behind American regional hegemony through the lens of Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of political ideas. In particular, such an analysis would shed light on how concepts developed in the American political, academic and security fields, such as the “War on Terror”, has been absorbed and deployed by regional elites to gain legitimacy and accumulate political and symbolic capital. This would also offer stimulating perspectives in the field of security studies.
Finally, this theoretical approach can offer an important contribution to the debate regarding democratisation, both in the Middle East and beyond. By deconstructing the “battle of the models” during the Arab Spring, this thesis argued that, to appreciate the influence of a certain model of governance or set of political ideas in international politics, it is necessary to focus on the interplay between the political field of the “model country” (the field of production) and the fields of other states (the fields of reception). This has been demonstrated through the example of the Arab Spring. The initial success of the “AKP model” is explained through the relationship of homology between the party and the Muslim Brotherhood in the political fields of Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt. This theoretical claim was further strengthened by the evidence offered by the Saudi case, in which I illustrated how the Saudi regime and the Egyptian military established a homologous strategy of preserving their respective fields of power. This analysis offers a nuanced explanation on how, in certain transnational political spaces, power relations among different political fields (and within political fields) may affect processes of democratisation.

Setting aside these possibilities for future research, my thesis has shown the utility of Bourdieu’s sociology as a powerful conceptual apparatus able to unveil the complicated relationships between domestic political struggles, foreign policy and the making of international politics, thus making an important contribution to the research agenda of the French sociologist in IR. Through a Bourdieu-inspired theoretical framework, this thesis demonstrated how the discourses affecting foreign policies of Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia were the product of strategies of accumulation of political capital (also known as principles of vision and division) adopted by dominant political agents in their internal struggles. Moreover, this thesis also demonstrated how the Arab Spring affected the evolution of these countries’ internal politics. In this way, the thesis was able to reconceptualise regional politics during the regional upheavals as a symbolic struggle among three principles of vision and division – namely the AKP’s religious-democratic principle, the Iranian conservatives’ anti-imperialist principle and the Saudi authoritarian principle – that aim to redefine the Middle East regional space according to the logic of one political field. This analysis offers an important insight on how internal political struggles in Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia have redefined Middle East regional politics, thus contributing to the current debate on the Arab Spring in IR.
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213


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219


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