1. Introduction

Populism in the Middle East has a relatively long history. Examples in the twentieth century are Nasser’s populism in Egypt (Hibbard and Layton 2010; Di Tella 1997; Nedelcu 2014), Kemalism in Turkey (Karpat 1963; Keli 1980; Di Tella 1997), and Menahem Begin’s Likud party in Israel (Filc 2006, 2010; Shapiro 1991, 1996). Populism in the Middle East, though, does not only belong to the mid-twentieth century, but is still a significant presence in countries such as Egypt, Iran, Israel, and Turkey (Hadiz 2016). The present chapter will discuss populism in the last three countries, each one presenting different variants and developments of the populist phenomenon.

While there is a relatively broad agreement among scholars in characterizing political phenomena such as Khomeinism, the Turkish AKP, or the Israeli Likud as populist, the term is often used without a clear definition, as if its use was non-controversial. However, populism has been understood as an ideology, a discursive strategy, an economic approach, a mobilization strategy, or a political style; thus, in order to allow for a regional analysis of the phenomenon, we must make clear how the term is understood and used. Lately, Cass Mudde’s definition of populism as a thin ideology that considers society as separated into two antagonist groups – the pure people and the corrupted elites, and that politics must be an expression of the people’s general will (Mudde 2007) – has been widely accepted and has based comparative and empirical research on populism. Although it has been used in order to analyze Latin-American populism, Mudde’s definition was developed in the research of the European populist radical right. When analyzing countries with non-liberal democracies, or limited democracies, this definition fails to distinguish between any democratic movement, and populist ones (Ochoa Espejo 2011). Thus, in addressing populism in the Middle East, I propose to adopt a more complex definition of the term, combining Mudde’s and Laclau’s (2005) contributions to the definition of populism with insights from political sociology which analyze populism as a political practice by which a group undergoes a process of transformation by which it becomes an active collective political subject (Jansen 2011). For Jansen populism is a political project, defined as “a concerted and sustained set of ... mobilizational and discursive practices – that maintains a degree of enduring coherence, both in terms of its rhetorical underpinnings and its ongoing enactment” (2011: 385).
A political project is populist when it is built on the prolonged mobilization of excluded social groups, mobilized through anti-elitist and nationalist rhetoric and grounded on the signifier “people” as a common denominator. While Jansen’s emphasis on excluded groups stems from his focus on Latin America, his main contribution in my view is that populism is not only defined by its ideology but also by its practices and its socio-political consequences.

Thus, in the present chapter populism will be understood as a “family” of political movements which present an alternative hegemonic project in societies in which conflicts over the inclusion/exclusion of certain social groups are central. Those movements are characterized by understanding society as divided into the people and its enemies (elites, foreigners), and by their anti-liberal understanding of democracy as expressing the will of a homogeneous people. Populist movements conceptualize the people as simultaneously the whole nation, the “plebs”, and an ethno-national unity (Hermet 2001). While all populist movements use those three meanings (or combinations between them), movements who stress mainly the people as “plebs” belong to the inclusive populist sub-family, and those movements that understand the people mainly as an ethno-national unity belong to the exclusionary sub-family. The former use the signifier people as a way to symbolically include previously excluded social groups, through the formula “we also are the people”. In the latter case, “people” plays a symbolically exclusionary function: “we are the people, you are not”. The populist movement is built through the conformation of chains of equivalences between the claims of different social groups (Laclau 2005). However, while Laclau considers the chain of equivalences as symbolical, the present chapter considers three different dimensions around which populist movements are constituted: symbolical, distributive or material, and political.

The chapter discusses three case studies – Iran, Turkey, and Israel – analyzing if and which movements can be considered populist, and considering whether there are examples of inclusive or exclusionary populism. Moreover, as argued in the specific cases, the study of populism in the Middle East illuminates another sub-family, that of religious populism. Religious populism is characterized by a tension between inclusion and exclusion, since religion defines the boundaries of belonging, and as a consequence it has an irreducible exclusionary dimension (Tugal 2002).

2. Populism in Iran

The political forces that played a leading role in the 1979 revolution and led to the establishment of the Islamic republic presented strong populist tones. Several researchers have characterized both Ayatollah Khomeini’s leadership and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s presidency as Islamic populism (Afrachteh 1981; Dodson and Dorraj 2008; Alamdari 2005). However, while both leaders and their movement present features that fit the definition of populism, there is a constant tension between these features and the intrinsic elitist character of Khomeinism’s political theory and practice; a tension already present in Shia Islam as a duality between an egalitarian conception of justice and an elitist conception of political leadership (Dorraj 2014).

The process of authoritarian economic transformation from a basically agrarian economy with urban commerce to a capitalist economy led by Reza Shah created the socio-economic conditions not only for the revolution, but also for the emergence of a populist movement. The economic and cultural changes displaced the bazaar elites, positioned the clergy as a subordinated elite, created a new mass of urban working class that due to the characteristics of the transition to capitalism did not engage in more “traditional” forms of class politics, and generated cultural alienation. This complex combination produced a struggle for inclusion, and thus the precondition for the emergence of a populist movement. Khomeinism, however,
was a more complex movement than more “traditional” populist movements in South America, the USA, or Europe, with an internal contradiction between its populist and elitist characteristics. Khomeini’s political theory, built around the concept of Velayat-e-Faqih (the supreme religious jurist), is strongly elitist. For Khomeinism, sovereignty does not reside in the people but in God and his temporal deputies (Afrachteh 1981). Khomeini extended to the political realm the Shiite precept that “all Shiite lay personas must choose a ... cleric whose rulings on the details of religious practice they must follow” (Alamdari 2005). Since government must observe the divine law, the supervision of the clergy is mandatory (Arjomand 2009). While it was accepted traditionally in the Shia that following the occultation of the Twelfth Imam the jurists are the religious authority, Khomeini argued that also the Imam’s right to rule devolved upon the jurists. Moreover, as against the traditional Shiite principle that no jurist has authority over other jurists, Khomeini claimed that if a jurist succeeded in setting up a government, the other jurists must follow him (Arjomand 2009). The Imam (and Khomeini was considered an Imam after the revolution) is the personification of the popular will (Afrachteh 1981). Khomeini specifically attacked the concept of popular sovereignty, central to the populist worldview, writing, “No religious jurist has said or written in any book that we are kings and sovereignty is our right” (quoted in Arjomand 2009). With the consolidation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the concept of Velayat-e-Faqih developed into a concrete political role – the Supreme leader – with the authority to dismiss the president, declare war and peace, and appoint military commanders and the senior clerics to the Council of the Guardians (Abrahamian 1991). This elitist and anti-populist strand is even more crude among some of the most important clerics of the revolution, such as Morteza Motahhari. Motahhari specifically denounced what he called “the plague of populism”, arguing

Our leaders cannot render a leading role because of the plague of populism ... It is intrinsic to the character of the lay people to adhere to the past and the way that they are accustomed to, they do not distinguish between right and wrong.

(quoted in Ashtiani 1994)

But together with this strong elitism, Khomeinism was a movement organized around the centrality of the opposition between the people and its other in a double sense: as the opposition between the oppressed or dispossessed (mostazafin) and the oppressors (mostakberin), and as the opposition between the umma, the community of believers, and its enemies. The tension between the elitist and the populist trends was overcome by the argument that the new Islamic republic is the regime of both the umma and the Imamate, since the constitution converts the people into the umma (the community of believers) and the umma “inevitably needs the Imamate” (Arjomand 2009).

As a populist movement Khomeinism has clear inclusive characteristics at the three above-mentioned dimensions; but because of its strong religious identity, it also presents exclusionary features, since it is closed for non-Muslims (non-believers), and even for Sunni Islam. The importance of inclusive concepts such as community, authenticity, social justice, and socio-political participation was stressed through the use of Islamic symbols, which excluded non-Muslims (Ashtiani 1994).

Khomeinism, in accord with Mudde and Canovan’s characterizations of populism, sees society – and the whole world – as a struggle between two antagonist camps: the dispossessed or oppressed (mostazafin) and the exploiters or oppressors (mostakberin); the poor against the rich, the shanty-town dwellers against the palace dwellers, the oppressed nations against Satan’s government (Abrahamian 1991). Within this Manichean view, the revolution belongs
to the disinherited and the barefooted (Dorraj 2014; Salehi-Isfahani 2009), and Khomeini was posed as the leader of the dispossessed masses of the world (Dodson and Dorraj 2008). Khomeini constituted the opposition between the people and the enemy – the elite, the USA, Israel, Iraq, and their internal allies such as liberals, seculars, leftists, and the corrupted – through what Ernesto Laclau (2005) called “chains of equivalences”, claiming, for example, “[T]he martyrs of the Islamic revolution were all members of lower classes – peasants, industrial workers and bazaar merchants and tradesmen” (quoted in Abrahamian 1991). Moreover, in a symbolic attempt to close the gap between Khomeinism’s populist and elitist characteristics, he argued that most of the Shia ulama, including the grand Ayatollahs, emerged from the common people (Abrahamian 1991).

Khomeinism also had an inclusive material dimension. In the first two years, nationalizations and confiscation of property from individuals associated with the Shah’s regime resulted in a significant redistribution of wealth. Khomeinism produced a reversal of prior social mobility patterns to the relative benefit of the Islamic constituency. The Gini coefficient fell by 7% in the Revolution’s early years. The regime implemented redistributive policies such as ceilings to private property, reduction of the nominal salaries of all but the lowest echelons of the state bureaucracy, food and energy subsidies, a law that reduced the gap between blue-collar and white-collar workers, and interest-free banking (Dorraj 2014; Afrachteh 1981). Inclusive policies comprised also the extension of services and the implementation of basic welfare measures such as building of infrastructure in the rural areas and poor urban neighborhoods, the provision of electricity, safe drinking water, health services and schools to millions of poor households, and the establishment of a housing foundation for the urban poor (Afrachtech 1981; Dorraj 2014; Salehi-Isfahani 2009). The public financing of civil society institutions run by the clergy, and the channelization of public funds for welfare, and even investment, through the bonyads – Islamic charity foundations – exemplify the ways Khomeinism tried to combine populist discourse and policies with clerical elitism.

The tension between its populist and elitist poles is more salient at the political dimension. The constitution is a clear expression of Khomeini’s political philosophy, as expressed in the office of the Supreme leader or in the Council of the Guardians (a body of six clerics and six lawyers which among other tasks supervises laws passed in the Parliament to ensure that they do not contradict the shar’ia or the constitution). This role of the Council of the Guardians presents strong similarities with anti-majoritarian judiciary review in liberal democracies.

On the other side, Khomeini made use of direct democracy instruments such as referenda. Moreover, Khomeinism was also a movement that allowed for the political empowerment of social groups that were outsiders to the political arena, as appears from the high turnover in parliament, the high percentage of representatives coming from low echelons in the security forces or public services, and the high percentage of deputies born in small towns (Arjomand 2009).

While the presidencies of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohamad Khatami represented a departure from Khomeinism as a populist movement; Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s election signaled the reappearance of populist Khomeinism. Ahmadinejad himself presented his mandate as a return to the origins of the revolution and to Khomeini’s way. Already as major of Teheran he adopted a populist approach, stressing his humble origins, his being a “man of the people”. For example, he donned the uniform of garbage men and said he would not trade his job of the people’s street sweeper for anything (Arjomand 2009). He used the same topic when running for presidency, when one of his campaign’s slogans was “I am proud of being the Iranian nation’s humble servant and street sweeper” (Arjomand 2009). Ahmadinejad symbolically constructed the opposition between conservative Islam as the people, and the reformists as the elites, for example criticizing president Khatami for living in the rich north and not in popular
Teheran (Ansari 2007). During his campaign he blamed reformists for corruption and growing inequality and identified them as rich north-Tehranis (Ansari 2008).

Arjomand claims that as president, Ahmadinejad had “an instinctive sense of the integrative dimension of the Islamic revolution” (Arjomand 2009). He traveled to 2,000 towns, held cabinet meetings in some of these towns, received millions of personal requests and petitions, and dedicated time to answering those requests. Among the antagonist positions he presented as part of the people/elites divide was that between the martyrs of the revolution, the defenders of the nation and the people – the soldiers fallen in the war with Iraq – and the intellectuals and the students. As part of the symbolic construction of this antagonism he wanted to rebury martyrs of the war in the universities (though he did not succeed in his attempts and had to limit himself to reburying them in city parks) (Arjomand 2009). He attacked intellectuals and universities, depicting them as a fifth column that polluted the purity of the Islamic revolution by importing Western ideas (Ansari 2007). “With the forming of the ninth government [Ahmadinejad’s] the death knell of intellectualism was sounded”, declared the head of Parliament’s commission for cultural affairs, and an Ahmadinejad supporter (quoted in Farzanegan 2009).

Ahmadinejad’s populism was more exclusionary than Khomeini’s. His belief in the return of the Twelfth Imam stressed the exclusively Shiite character of the “people”, within a messianic and millenarian worldview for which the revolution’s main mission “is to pave the way for the reappearance of the Mahdi” (quoted in Arjomand 2009). He also adopted a nativist Iranian definition of the “people”, arguing that Iranians are the chosen people, and adopted an aggressive nationalist stand, as exemplified by his confrontational politics concerning the nuclear issue (Ansari 2007; Dodson and Dorraj 2008).

There was also a material dimension to Ahmadinejad’s populism, already from his time as major of Teheran, when he redirected resources toward income support programs such as marriage assistance loans for the poor. During his presidential campaign he argued that privatization and price deregulation had been exploited to benefit a small group of elite politicians and businessmen, and promised to alleviate poverty and provide jobs, condemning the size of the state and its bureaucracy, wealth and income differentials, low wages, and monopolies (Habibi 2015; Fang 2007). He argued that insofar as banks are allowed to operate as profit-making institutions, there is no possibility for a thriving national production, a version of the populist producers/financers dichotomy. In what was arguably one of his most remembered campaign promises, he committed to “putting the oil money on everyone’s dinner table”. Following this commitment, as president he directly distributed money to the poor, increased the minimum wage and implemented special funds that offered no or low-interest loans to young couples. Ahmadinejad headed a “populist” privatization of public firms, distributing “justice shares” to low-income households at highly discounted prices. This was also a way to reward low-income supporters of the regime: The Basij militia, veterans of the Iran-Iraq war, families of those who fell in the war (Habibi 2015). Ahmadinejad also adopted proactive financial policies, ordering state-owned commercial banks to direct financial resources toward preferred geographic areas and economic sectors at low interest rates. He facilitated the establishment of non-bank financial institutions, most of them affiliated with Islamic charity foundations and the military (Habibi 2015). In parallel with redistributive measures, the clergy headed bonyads and the security apparatus increased their control over the economy – a proof of the tensions, also in the material dimension, between the populist and the elitist tendencies. All in all, Ahmadinejad’s first presidency had inclusive social results. Quality of life based on UNDP indicators improved, the total index rising from 0.671 in 2005 to 0.707 in 2011 (Habibi 2015). The access of Iranian households to a variety
of durable goods and appliances improved during his mandate. In the first year of Ahmadinejad’s presidency the Misery index decreased from 30% to just above 20%, and the Gini index decreased (Faranegan). However, in his last years as president, the poverty rate increased once again, mostly due to high inflation and growing unemployment (Habibi 2015).

Politically, Ahmadinejad’s government resulted more in the strengthening of the clerical elite than in the inclusion of the “common people” into the political arena. The increased strength of the clergy and the security apparatus’ role in the economy and their increased role as providers of welfare services, strengthened their political stand. Moreover, he was supported by the most conservative and elitist sectors within the Iranian political system, among them the cleric Muhamad-Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi. The latter, who saw Ahmadinejad’s as the first true Islamic government and was said to have a strong influence on the President (at least until 2012), holds strongly elitist views and opposes any form of popular sovereignty. In his view authority had not been delegated by God to the people, but remains with the Hidden Imam. Sovereignty is always divine. Popular sovereignty implies the dilution of the Islamic revolution’s core values, which can only be protected by a religious intellectual elite (Ansari 2008).

In the end, Ahmadinejad’s government fell prey to the contradictions between the elitist and populist tendencies of Khomeinism and its legacy, which resulted in growing authoritarianism, international isolation, and economic difficulties.

3. Populism in Turkey

Populism as a mobilization strategy has been a feature of the conservative center parties in Turkey since the 1950s, even though Kemalist parties were not populist movements in the full sense of the term (Akman 2010). Top-down modernization, authoritarianism, Turkish nationalism, and the militant laicism of Kemalism, excluded (and repressed) those who did not identify with the state-imposed identities (Ozen 2015). Combined with the specific way in which capitalism developed in Turkey (generating a new urban working population, most of them working in the informal sector or unemployed, and a peripheral big bourgeoisie), it created the social basis for the potential emergence of a populist movement (Hadiz 2014). When the distant attitude of Muslim masses toward modernism and laicism (Koruglu 2013) combined with a serious economic crisis, it opened the opportunity for the emergence of a populist Islamic movement, represented by the AKP (Ozen 2015; Hadiz 2014). The AKP was established in 2001, only a year before the 2002 election, as the “reformist” wing following the division of the Islamist Virtue party into the AKP and a more traditionalist wing, the Felicity Party (Koruglu 2013). This new Islamic populism conceptualizes the ummah as a mass of socially and economically deprived but morally virtuous “common people”, opposed to rapacious and immoral elites (and their foreign, non-Islamic allies). The project, in its first years, combined aggressive economic liberalization, some steps toward democratization and conservative values based on the Islamic tradition (Ozen 2015; Sambur 2009).

The AKP’s rhetoric divides society into the “people” and the elite, “[T]hey [the elites] have no toleration to the people and their values” (Erdogan, quoted in Koruglu 2013). They present themselves as the defenders of the people against the state, which was seen as dominated by the elites. An expression of this was the slogan “Yeter, Soz Milletin” (Enough, Nation speaks), which was later modified to “Enough, Nation decides” (Koruglu 2013). Erdogan and the AKP use the signifier people in inclusionary ways, to denote the “common people”, as against the laic and illustrated elites: “My story is the story of this people. Either the people will win and come to power, or the pretentious and oppressive minority . . . will remain in power. The authority to decide . . . belongs to the people”
The AKP presents itself as “the party of the people . . . voice of the silent masses, protector of the defenseless” (in Akman 2010). Erdogan has been promoted as a man of the people and the voice of all the marginalized groups (Selcuk 2016).

The AKP’s support comes indeed from “the common people”, since the majority of the AKP’s votes come from housewives, followed by farmers, blue-collar workers in the private sector, and the unemployed (Bozkurt 2013). However, as argued above, religious-based populism has always also an exclusionary element, because the boundaries of the people are those of the religious community. In the Turkish case, the limits of the people are both those of the religious community and of the Turkish nation. From here stems the exclusion of minority groups, mainly the Alevi, and since the stalemate in the conversations with the Kurds, also the latter. Erdogan has symbolically excluded the Alevi, for example by naming a new bridge over the Bosporus after the Sultan Yavuz Selim, who defeated the Shia Safavids and extirpated the Alevi from the empire (Salt 2016). He has also implied that Alevi are not truly identified with Turkish interests, and that opposition leader Kilicdaroglu’s opposed Turkey’s policy in Syria because he is an Alevi (Salt 2016). Concerning the Kurds, as late as 2013 Erdogan represented a more inclusive approach that was common in Turkish politics, permitting towns to refer to themselves by Kurdish names and allowing private schools to give some classes in Kurdish, and even having contacts with Abdullah Ocalan the Kurdish leader in jail. But in 2015, in relation with the development of the civil war in Syria, the talks reached a dead end and Erdogan adopted an aggressive policy, which eventually led to a de facto war against Kurdish towns and villages in southeast Turkey (Karaveli 2016). Moreover, in similar ways to Ahmadinejad in Iran and, as discussed below, exclusionary populism in Israel, Erdogan builds a chain of equivalences linking the “enemies of the people”, such as “[A] cademician-looking supporters, journalists-looking spies, Politician-looking activists and civil servant-looking militias are no different from terrorists with bombs in their hands” (Erdogan, quoted in Salt 2016: 130). Among the enemies of the people AKP leaders have included the secularist elites, intellectuals, the international media, the Jewish diaspora, foreign economic interests, and the “terrorist” Kurds (Salt 2016; Ozen 2015). As a populist movement, AKP’s view of democracy is non-liberal, stressing direct democracy mechanisms and opposing anti-majoritarian checks and balances. Erdogan has a plebiscitary view of democracy, where democracy is equated with popular will and majorities in the ballot box epitomize the will of the nation (Aytac and Onis 2014). In line with this view of democracy, the 2017 referendum in fact transformed the parliamentary system into a presidential one, but with the president having the power to dissolve Parliament. The reforms have been justified by Erdogan as a step needed to “remove the cacophony” of the present system, allowing the president to issue decrees carrying the force of law. However, presidential decrees cannot contradict rights and responsibilities guaranteed by the constitution, and cannot contradict laws legislated by Parliament (Kirisci 2017). The AKP already strengthened the presidency vis a vis the Parliament as a mediator between the executive and the people’s will. Thus Erdogan became the first president elected by popular vote and not by the Parliament (Salt 2016). For him the Constitutional Court and the High Judiciary “formed an alliance to prevent people from achieving power” (quoted in Aytac and Onis 2014). The powers of the Constitutional Court mean that “[T]he will of the majority was imprisoned by the will of the minority” (quoted in Dincsahin 2012). The constitutional amendments proposed by the AKP are aimed to allow for the “direct” expression of the people’s will, since “[I]t is only the people who can protect the republic, not an institution” (quoted in Dincsahin 2012). Erdogan and his government even challenged the authority of the Constitutional Court. When in March 2016 the Court
ordered the release of two jailed journalists, Erdogan said he neither respected nor would abide by the Court’s decision, since it was “against the nation” (Salt 2016).

Similar to Khomeinism in Iran, the AKP has successfully absorbed the traditional Islamic solidarity patterns to reproduce the neoliberal model (Ozdemir 2015). For AKP’s neoliberal Islamic populism, the markets operate in ways favorable to the ummah (Hadiz 2014), combining privatization and liberalization of finance and of the labor market with targeted help to the poorest sectors – a low-cost means to gain support for neoliberalism (Ozdemir 2015).

AKP’s radical neoliberalism included fiscal discipline, tight monetary policies, broad privatizations (20 billion raised in privatization revenues from 2005 to 2007) and the implementation of pro-capital policies (Aytac and Onis 2014). Among the latter, “flexibilization” of employment, the dismantlement of administrative barriers to investment, reducing the corporate tax rate, strengthening the legal protection of foreign investors, incentives for foreign investment such as easy access to real estate, guarantees to transfer proceeds, and no minimum capital requirement (Aytac and Onis 2014).

Apart from targeted means–tested measures, the initial success in lowering inflation improved the situation of the sectors with lower incomes living from fixed incomes. Low inflation resulted in a decline in the interest rates and extension of credits, especially mortgages, which supported the construction sector led economic boom. The construction boom resulted from giant costly infrastructure projects, the state becoming a direct provider and a facilitator of housing, and an increase in household debt (Ozdemir 2015; Ozen 2015). The volume of consumer loans and credit card debt increased from 1.8% of the GDP in 2002 to 18.7% in 2012, and household debt grew from 7.5% of disposable income in 2003 to some 50% in 2012 (Ozdemir 2015). The increase in consumer credit was most salient in the housing market, due not only to lower interest rates but also to the 2007 mortgage law, which broadened the field of mortgage lenders and created a sub-prime market where securitization of mortgages allows funds for further lending (Cobandag 2010). Economic growth led by the construction sector not only benefited economic sectors close to the party, but increased the demand for labor, with special emphasis on demand for relatively unqualified workers (Kaynak 2016). AKP implemented a redistributive program, by which construction companies paid for the right to build apartments for the middle and upper-middle classes in public lands, and those funds were used to finance housing projects for lower-income groups (Ozdemir 2015).

Welfare policies included two different, but complementary, types of policy. First, the transformation of the existing welfare regime, from a social security system based on workers’ rights to targeted assistance programs (Ozdemir 2015; Kaynak 2016). Second, the increase in the number of people receiving social aid, through the conversion of social policy to charity. The Turkish welfare regime had similarities with what Espig-Andersen (1990) named conservative welfare regime, since there were three different social security schemes depending on the type of employment (civil servants, workers in the private sector, self-employed). This was a system in which the informally employed – some 50% of the Turkish working force – did not have social security at all (Ozdemir 2015). The modification in the social security system combined the broadening of eligibility criteria – thus making it more inclusive – with the privatization of services, in accord with neoliberal ways. This combination is exemplified by the 2006 Social Security and Universal Health Insurance law. The law unified the three existing systems into one, resulting in diminished benefits and increased costs to veteran members of the social security system, while expanding benefits to the formerly excluded (Ozdemir 2015). The new law established contributions of 12.5% of the personal income, and state funding for people whose income was less than one third of the minimum wage. The transformation of the welfare regime benefited sectors of the subordinated classes – the more excluded, those working in the
informal sector – while worsening the conditions of organized labor. The latter were already harmed by measures such as the flexibilization of employment, diminishing job security, worsening of working condition, and limitation on unions’ activity, such as the postponement of legal strikes, a telling feature of industrial relations under the AKP government (Aytac and Onis 2014; Ozdemir 2015). During the AKP’s government workers’ rights eroded and unionization rates decreased from 10% in 2000 to 5.7% in 2010 (Ozdemir 2015). The Turkish case, thus, particularly emphasizes the contradictions between populism and traditional class politics.

The second main characteristic of AKP’s welfare policy was the shift of responsibility for social security from the central government to municipalities and vakıfs (charitable foundations). The increasing role of the latter increased the charity character of social services (Ozdemir 2015). Moreover, the state itself adopted an NGO character. The AKP created the SYDGM, the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Solidarity, an autonomous organization accountable only to the Prime Minister office, which distributes means-tested and in-kind aid (Onis and Senses 2009). The SYDMG was molded on the vakif institutional model, based on the Islamic tradition that emphasizes the duty to care for the poor. The SYDGM funds and supervises about 1,000 local foundations run by civil society religious organizations (Ozdemir 2015), a system which has similarities with the state funding of bonyads in Iran.

At the political level the AKP has a contradictory role, reflecting the fact that it presents inclusive and exclusionary characteristics. The AKP has facilitated the strengthening of a new political elite among party supporters (Whiting and Kaya 2016). Moreover, the planned reform increases the number of Parliament members and lowers the age requirement to be elected for Parliament, both inclusive steps. On the other side, in the last years Erdogan has adopted a politically exclusionary approach toward the Kurds, exemplified by his call to “throw them (HDP representatives allegedly supporting the PKK) out of the Grand National Assembly ... or even denaturalize them. These people cannot be MPs or citizens of Turkey” (quoted in Salt 2016: 129–130). Moreover, his increasing authoritarianism – while grounded in populist motives and justified as a defense of popular democracy against coup attempts – also has clear exclusionary traits (Yabanci 2016). Erdogan’s authoritarianism has increased following the failed coup attempt, leading to mass arrests of journalists, academics, and figures of the opposition, undergoing a transition from a populist approach to a more openly authoritarian one (Temken 2017).

Summing up, the Turkish AKP represents a form of religious – Islamic – populism combining inclusionary characteristics at the symbolic, material, and political dimensions, with the exclusionary intrinsic characteristics of a religious definition of the common we.

4. Populism in Israel

Populism is prevalent in Israeli politics because conflicts concerning the inclusion/exclusion of subordinate social groups have marked Israeli society since its inception. Such conflicts stem from the interplay of several factors: the tension between the conceptualization of the Jewish people as a religious unity and its heterogeneous character, the lasting conflict with the indigenous Palestinian population, and the ongoing colonial situation in the Occupied Territories. Thus Israel is characterized by persistent conflicts about the inclusion/exclusion of different social groups, among them Israeli Arabs, Mizrahim (Jews who immigrated to Israel from Arab countries), and immigrants from the former USSR or from Ethiopia. In a divided society, the signifier “people” has become a major reference point for the constitution of political identities, and populism a central feature of the political system. Historically, the current dominant party, the Likud, developed as a populist inclusive movement under Menachem Begin’s leadership. Populism was the way for inclusion
within a social context in which class politics were not a real alternative for the excluded Mizrahim, since the workers’ union played a central role in their exclusion. The party developed a narrative of the Israeli history that symbolically included Mizrahim in the common “we”; implemented some economic and social policies aimed to their material inclusion; and politically included Mizrahim by opening the party to a Mizrahi young political leadership that emerged at the local level and reached national dimensions (Filc 2010). Today, there are three parties which can be considered populist, the three of them part of the current government coalition: “Shas”, an ultra-orthodox religious Mizrahi party, “Israel Our Home” (IOH), and the Likud (which as argued below is currently an exclusionary populist party).

Shas emerged in 1983, as a reaction both to the exclusion and segregation of Mizrahim within the closed ultra-orthodox world and to the exclusion of Mizrahim in Israeli society as a whole. At its peak (1999) it achieved 17 seats out of 120; in the last elections they got seven seats, and lately they are losing their power even more. Shas addresses the socio-political world as divided into “we the people” (the Jewish people, understood as a religious community, with the subordinate Mizrahim as its core – the “true” people) and the “Other” (the elites, mainly the secular Israeli Ashkenazi Jews and non-Jews like migrant workers and asylum seekers). As is the case with Islamic populism, Shas presents inclusive characteristics within the exclusionary limits of religious belonging, limits that establish that you are a Jew only if you are born to a Jewish mother (or convert following the strict Orthodox rules). Shas supports exclusionary policies toward migrant workers and asylum seekers, even though its approach to Israeli Arabs is more nuanced, differing from the clearly exclusionary and xenophobic approaches of IOH and the Likud.

Shas’ populism is built around two main oppositions: traditional or religious Mizrahim who are the common people, versus the secular Ashkenazi elite; and Jews versus non-Jews. Its goal is to restore the people “to its ancient glory for all the classes, groups and communities that make our people, especially the poor classes” (Shas Homepage), where restoration implies restoring the primacy of the Jewish religion. Shas’ leader Arie Deeri summed up this view in an interview:

they [the secular elites] want to be the ones who determine the agenda for being Israeli. They want to decide what an Israeli has to look like, and anyone who does not adhere to their style and standards is not a “true” Israeli; he is a fanatic, a Mizrahi, a fool. And they are a minority . . . they want to be a Western island in the Middle East.

(Ben-Hayim 2002)

Shas aspires to replace the secular Ashkenazi worldview with a model of Israelness rooted in the Mizrahi traditional worldview:

we do not want to be a metastasis of their government. Rather, we want to be partners in a revolution whereby we will become part of the government . . . not only with regard to religious but also to social and other issues.

(Cohen 2000)

In the 2015 elections Shas campaigned as the champion of the “transparent” people, the poor and the marginalized, and the enemy of the affluent middle classes. Shas’ vision of democracy is profoundly anti-liberal. They completely oppose the idea of the state as neutral, they are very critical of juridical review and of the court as a secular comptroller, and they even oppose the very idea of a constitution, since, while the laws are human, the only legitimate constitution is from divine origin.
In the material dimension, Shas considers social justice as one of its two main goals. For Shas neoliberal globalization represents a “threat to the country’s character, and damage the Jewish values of equality, charity, compassion, and mutual responsibility” (Shas Homepage). Shas supports a welfare state “grounded on the values of equality, social justice, and communitarian solidarity”, which places the needs of the lower classes high on the national agenda, ensuring basic services to low-income families, and increasing family and old-age allowances (ibid.). However, due to its exclusionary conflation between people and religion, Shas is a welfare chauvinist party that considers that asylum seekers should be denied access to basic social rights, such as the right to work and the right to health care services. Moreover, it should be noted that Shas was a key coalition member during almost 30 of the last 32 years, and a fundamental partner in the neo-liberalization of Israel that took place since 1985 (Sheetreet 2001), even though it conditioned its participation in government on the implementation of some redistributive measures such as the increase in transference payments; and opposed regressive measures such as charging VAT on fruit and vegetables or “across the board” budget cuts.

From the political point of view, Shas is different from most populist movements. While the latter are in general characterized by a loose organization, Shas resembles traditional mass parties, with developed civil society institutions such as schools, youth, and consumer organizations. Also politically Shas plays both an inclusive and an exclusionary role. Shas became the channel that allowed a generation of young Mizrahi religious youth to enter politics, and become political subjects; while in parallel excludes women from political activity and opposes any openness toward the integration of asylum seekers and migrant workers.

IOH, created in 1999 and with six seats in parliament in the last elections, promotes a nativist view of the people as an ethnically homogeneous people, as a natural community; a view that grounds xenophobia and nationalism. IOH’s worldview includes also anti-elitism, a “law and order” approach to social issues, and an anti-liberal understanding of democracy. The party embraces a nativist vision of the people and longs for a homogeneous community, free from the existence of minorities, which creates conflict among people with different identities living under the same roof . . . Where two peoples or two religions coexist there is potential for conflict . . . This is even truer in our case, where the identity struggle combines the national and the religious.

(IOH Homepage)

For IOH,

[the state of Israel was bound to be the Jewish state, and not the state of the Jews, or the state of all its citizens. The definition of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state is not banal. Israel is first a Jewish state, then a democratic one.

(ibid.)

In order to pursue ethno-national homogeneity, the party claims that peace conversations should aim to redraw the borders of Israel and the future Palestinian state in such a way that the two states would be as ethnically homogeneous as possible. “The core of this idea is to divide the Jewish and Arab peoples and to create a separate political framework for each one” (ibid.). This represents the people’s will to be one and unified. For IOH the elites collaborate with the foreign enemy against the people. In the party’s view, traditional dominant groups
“the social oligarchy” are in connivance with the foreign enemy against “us|”, the people (Lieberman 2002). “Us” are “the new immigrants, the residents of development towns, the settlers in Judea and Samaria [the West Bank], and ultra-orthodox Jews”. “Them” are first and foremost the judiciary – especially the Supreme Court – the left, the media, the police, the state bureaucracy, and government officials (especially Treasury officials) (Lieberman 2006).

IOH fights against this oligarchy, this thin stratum that occupies all the centres of power and wealth . . . this is a struggle between those who hold the reins of power and do not want to share them, and we, the rest, who are the majority. This is a war of democracy against the oligarchy.

(ibid.: 57)

IOH’s vision of democracy is an anti-liberal one, and pluralism is seen as attempting against the people’s imagined original unity. In this line, the party considers that both the legislative and the judiciary branches should subordinate civil rights to personal and collective security, and that anti-majoritarian checks and balances, such as judiciary review, should be curtailed. In arguing for a bill that would free military orders from juridical supervision, Lieberman said: “I think that the Supreme Court’s interference with the decisions of commanders in active service is unprecedented. The goal of this bill is to free military decisions from juridical review” (Lieberman 2007). Thus, the party promotes the establishment of a Constitutional Court whose membership will be elected by “the people’s representatives in the Knesset” (IOH Homepage). This new Court will respond to

the will of the people . . . Since this court will deal mostly with principled, ideological, and even political issues, the judges will have to lift their eyes from the legal text and derive their decisions not from narrow juridical considerations but from everyday life.

(IOH Homepage)

In sum, Lieberman’s (and his party’s) discourse includes several features that characterize radical right populism: nativism and xenophobia, anti-elitist conception of society, an anti-liberal notion of democracy, and the belief in a strong, authoritarian state. IOH socio-economic view combines – as is the case with the AKP – neoliberalism (privatization, flexibilization of labor relations, dismantlement of the welfare state) with means-tested policies toward the poorest. Politically, IOH is a clear exclusionary party, being the first Israeli political party that made a central claim the political exclusion of Israeli Arabs. Under the slogan “No citizenship without loyalty” IOH claims that Israeli Arabs’ citizenship must be conditioned to playing allegiance to Israel as a Jewish state. The third populist party in Israel is the Likud, led by Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. Likud is currently Israel’s biggest party, with 30 seats in parliament. The party underwent two changes since its arrival to power as an inclusive populist party in the late 1970s. In the 1990s, under Netanyahu’s leadership, it became a neo-conservative party, similar to the Republican party in the USA under Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. However, since the 2010s, it is undergoing a second transformation, into an exclusionary populist party. The main figures embodying this change are the Minister of Culture and Sports Miri Regev, the current Ambassador in the UN and former Deputy Minister of Defense, Danny Danon, and the coalition’s Whip, David Bitan. And, of course, Netanyahu himself is adopting – at least discursively – populist exclusionary topics: nativism and xenophobia, the people (as a closed ethno-national unity)/elites division and an anti-liberal understanding of democracy. Ernesto Laclau (2005) argued that the
people is built through a chain of equivalences. Netanyahu builds the “anti-People” through a discursive chain of equivalences where ISIS is like Iran, Iran is like Hezbollah, Hezbollah is like Hamas, Hamas is like Abu Mazen and the Palestinian Authority and all the Palestinians in the OPT, the Palestinians in the OPT are like the Israeli Arabs, and the Israeli Arabs are like the Israeli left, all of them enemies of the “true people”.

As is the case with IOH, Likud’s main message nowadays is directed against Israeli Arabs, the “other” of the people, and against the “leftist elites” – intellectuals, the media, the Supreme Court. In last election day Netanyahu called Jewish citizens to come to vote because “the Israeli Arabs are galloping to the ballot boxes”; and when in November 2016 Israel faced several serious fires, all the Likud leadership – with no proof at all – accused Israeli Arabs for “fire terrorism”. Likud’s nativism is expressed also in their attacks against asylum seekers. Regev called Sudanese migrants “a cancer in the body of our nation” (JP 16/7/13) and Danon, wrote:

The influx of undocumented men … did real damage to the social fabric of our society … The Likud government … will work tirelessly until there are no more infiltrators crossing our borders and the number of illegal residents in our cities is severely reduced.

(JP 19/12/13)

The leftist elites are attacked as enemies of the people and accomplices of non-Jews. When the Court ruled against a law to imprison asylum seekers Regev declared:

The court is disconnected from the people. The court’s decision is essentially calling everyone in Africa to come to Israel, because infiltrators can move around freely. The court didn’t think of the good of the Israeli public in its decision and will make the situation intolerable.

(JP 22/9/14)

Minister of Tourism Yariv Levin directly accused the Court of being a nest of left-wingers.

Regev’s anti-elitist discourse has been especially salient in her current post as Culture and Sport Minister. She has declared her intention to rechannel state funds from the elitist cultural institution to institutions in the periphery and in the Jewish settlements in the occupied Palestinian Territories, and builds herself as the champion of the people’s culture as against the culture of the elites. In an interview she declared:

I, Miri Regev-Siboni from Kiryat Gat, daughter of Felix and Marcelle Siboni, have never read Chekhov and almost never went to plays as a child. I listened to Jo Amar [a Moroccan-Israeli singer, pioneer in introducing Moroccan Jewish liturgy music into Israel] and Sephardi songs, and I’m no less cultured than all the consumers of Western culture.

(JP 18/11/15)

Netanyahu constantly attacks journalists that criticize him and his government as ultra-leftists, and attempts to close the public broadcasting corporation for being “infiltrated by leftists”.

According to this view democracy is mostly about “the rule of the [Jewish] people”, understood as the will of the majority. In this vein Likud opposes central elements of liberal democracy such as judiciary review, the independence of the judiciary, or individual rights; for weakening the people’s will. Human right organizations and anti-occupation NGOs such
as “Breaking the Silence” have been demonized and attacked for being anti-Israeli, opposed to the common people’s interests, and caring only for “infiltrators”:

thousands of infiltrators that are helped by human rights organizations, leftist human rights’ organizations, since there are no organizations caring for the human rights of the [Israeli] citizens, those that pay taxes and go to the army . . . human rights are only for infiltrators.

(Regev, Knesset protocols 8/12/14)

Likud’s socio-economic policies under Netanyahu have been radically neoliberal, including broad privatizations, weakening the trade unions, financial liberalization, partially dismantling the welfare state, privatization of pensions, tax reductions for corporations and the upper classes, and direct financial support for foreign investors. However, figures such as Regev and Danon promote targeted financial support to villages and towns in the periphery, and the Likud-headed government funnels funds to specific poor social groups, such as ultra-orthodox Jews.

Politically, the Likud underwent a transition from allowing for the inclusion of Mizrahim, to build most of its political discourse on the exclusion of Israeli Arabs. Politicians as Regev and Danon promoted legislation aimed to ban specific Israeli Arabs MKs; and Bitan declared that he would be happier if Israeli Arabs wouldn’t vote at all. Reminding Erdogan’s approach to Kurdish members of Parliament, Regev called Arab MKs “Trojan Horses” (JP 22/9/14). She declared: “[MK Basel] Ghattas is another one of those Trojan horses that take advantage of the Knesset’s stage and represent terrorist organizations . . . Therefore, they belong out of the Knesset” (Knesset protocols 12/11/14). In the last elections the Likud promoted an initiative to forbid Arab MK Hanin Zohabi from running for Parliament. In the present Parliament, the government has passed a bill allowing for an elected MK to be expelled from Parliament if approved by three quarters of Parliament members, a bill outspokenly aimed against Arab MKs.

The Israeli society presents several characteristics that explain the pervasiveness of populist movements, and the tendency of these movements to present exclusionary characteristics. First, the way in which social stratification is framed by the Israeli society’s heterogeneous, multi-cultural character (a significant Arab minority and the heterogeneity of its Jewish population), making for permanent conflicts about the inclusion/exclusion of certain social groups. Second, the most significant minority group – Israeli Arabs – belongs to a national collective with which the majoritarian ethnic group is in conflict; a situation that facilitates the emergence and strengthening of exclusionary populism (Mudde 2007). Finally, the lack of a territorial definition of “we the people” and the religious boundaries of the people facilitate to equate demos with ethnos.

5. Conclusions
The analysis of Middle East populism illuminates the importance of a perspective that takes into account not only the ideological and/or discursive dimension; but also the conditions of its emergence, the interplay among inclusion and exclusion, and the particularities of the articulation between religion and populism. The three cases examined show how populism stems from the interaction between top-down modernization and exclusion combined with the local social consequences of neoliberal globalization. In the three cases we can also assess how religious populism, as it appears in the Middle East, presents inclusive elements at the
symbolic, material, and political levels; but presents an unsurpassable limit to inclusion, by equaling the people with the religious community. Defining the people as a religious community builds an unsurmountable obstacle for including those belonging to other religious confessions, or all those who do not consider themselves as belonging to any religion. Inclusiveness, thus is limited to the in-group, to the community of believers, and completely excludes non-believers.

Albeit the similarities, the three cases offer different insights. The Iranian case emphasizes the tensions between populist anti-elitism and its commitment to popular will, and religion (both because of the intrinsically elitist character of religious hierarchy and because the transcendental character of sovereignty). The Turkish and the Israeli case highlight the characteristics of populism in non-liberal (or semi-liberal) democracies, and the exclusionary potential of populism in societies characterized by ethno-national conflicts. Future research on Middle East populism must further address the specific ways in which religious populism copes with the contradiction between understanding sovereignty as transcendental and the claim that democracy must be the expression of popular will, and the tension between anti-elitism and the hierarchical (and elitist) character of religious institutions. Moreover, it should deepen our understanding of the specific forms in which globalization processes interact with ethno-national conflicts in giving birth to exclusionary forms of populism.

**Note**

1. The dynamic of anti-democratic attempts to bring down a populist leader by the force of arms, and the following exacerbation of authoritarian traits, is not exclusive of the Turkish case, and it happened also in Peron’s Argentina, and in Chavez’s Venezuela.

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