Deconstructing the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia is vital not only to delineate the trajectories of their rocky relationship, it also sheds light on some of the most complicated matters in the Middle East. Even though the two states share histories and cultures, they have been rivals engaged in a brutal conflict since the 1979 Iranian revolution.

As Teheran and Riyadh contend over leadership in the region and the Islamic world, a range of geopolitical and ideological dynamics reinforce the current rivalry. Yet in turn, it carries implications that reach the entire Middle East. In administering this conflict, both countries have utilized massive resources as well as their strategic location, religious standing, and regional and global relevance. While this dynamic has influenced all major recent developments in the region, including the Iraq-Iran war of the 1980s and the revolts that have ravaged Arab capitals since late 2010, the 2003 American invasion of Iraq took the rivalry to its most dangerous level.

This study explores how Iran and Saudi Arabia have affected the Arab revolts and, inversely, how these uprisings have impacted the Saudi–Iranian rivalry. The primary hypothesis is that this rivalry has hijacked the revolutionary moment that emerged in the region. Both capitals have utilized the unrest to further their political interests, and their involvement has significantly contributed to the revolts’ inability to achieve their goals of justice, liberty, and dignity.

This study argues that the rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh has challenged governments and states and threatened the unity of countries and societies in the region. As the interests of the two rivals became intertwined with those of the warring parties, Iran and Saudi Arabia―and their massive resources―were enabled to decisively influence both current developments and potential political settlements in the future.

After sketching the main elements of the balance of power theory that shall guide the analysis of the Saudi–Iranian rivalry, this paper consists of three sections. The first looks at the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, particularly focusing on developments following the 1979 Iranian revolution. The second surveys the proxy wars fought in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon. The third provides an analysis of the dynamics that governed the approaches utilized by Tehran and Riyadh to serve their interests rather than achieve the revolts’ goals.