Since 1979, few rivalries have affected Middle Eastern politics as much as the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, too often the rivalry has been framed purely in terms of ‘proxy wars’, sectarian difference, or the associated conflicts that have broken out in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen. In this book, Simon Mabon presents a more nuanced assessment of the rivalry, outlining its history and demonstrating its impact across the Middle East. Highlighting the significance of local groups, Mabon shows how regional politics have shaped and been shaped by the rivalry. The book draws from social theory and the work of Pierre Bourdieu to challenge problematic assumptions about ‘proxy wars’, the role of religion, and sectarianism. Exploring the changing political landscape of the Middle East as a whole and the implications for regional and international security, Mabon paints a complex picture of this frequently discussed but oft-misunderstood rivalry.

Simon Mabon is Professor of International Politics at Lancaster University. He is Director of SEPAD (the Sectarianism, Proxies and De-Sectarianization Project), which aims to trace the emergence and development of sectarian animosity in global politics. He has previously published *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East* (2013), *The Origins of ISIS* (2016, co-author), and *Houses Built on Sand* (2020), along with several other edited collections. In 2016/17 he served as academic advisor to the House of Lords International Relations Committee’s inquiry into the UK’s relationship with the Middle East.
The Struggle for Supremacy in the Middle East

*Saudi Arabia and Iran*

Simon Mabon
*Lancaster University*
For Edward-Omi, an endless source of love, happiness, and hope.
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After the completion of my first book (based on my PhD thesis) on Saudi–Iranian relations in 2013, I thought I was done writing on the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran. Like most, I felt uncomfortable with the ways in which I had developed ideas across the PhD and book, and I wanted to focus on other things, namely a burgeoning interest in sovereignty. Five years after *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East* came out, I returned to the topic. The genesis of this book came at the same time the Sectarianism, Proxies and De-sectarianization (SEPAD) project was formed in early 2018. In putting together a grant application to the Carnegie Corporation, the seeds of an idea were forming that would allow me to combine my interests in sectarianism and political theory with a study on Saudi–Iranian relations. When we were lucky enough to be successful with our funding application, the project was born.

I must first thank the wonderful people at Cambridge University Press for being so supportive of me – and patient with me – while I navigated the challenges of finishing the book at a time of global pandemic and the birth of our son. In particular, I wish to thank Maria Marsh – my first editor at I.B. Tauris – who was so enthusiastic about the project when it first began and helped guide it to completion. Thanks must also go to Santhamurthy Ramamoorthy, Natasha Whelan, and Rachel Imrie for their continued support and patience during my more idiosyncratic moments.

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