

***** SPECIAL ALERT *****

**Father of Washington Institute Iran Expert Arrested in Qom;
Family Banned from Leaving Country**

On Tuesday, January 12, four agents of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence (MOI) arrested Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Khalaji, father of Washington Institute Iran scholar Mehdi Khalaji, at the former's home in Qom, Iran. During a violent house search, MOI agents confiscated the Khalaji family's passports -- including that of Mehdi Khalaji's teenage daughter, who lives in Tehran -- and banned all family members from leaving Iran. Government agents also confiscated personal files, books, letters, a computer, and a satellite receiver. The family has no information about where Ayatollah Khalaji is being held, and Iranian officials have not provided any further information about his arrest or detention. Ayatollah Khalaji and his wife, with Mehdi's daughter, were planning to depart Iran for Dubai to seek visas to visit the United States in March.

Ayatollah Khalaji, sixty-one years old, was once arrested by the shah as a revolutionary agitator and, following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, welcomed Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to Qom -- the heart of Iran's religious clerical establishment -- on behalf of the city's residents. Recently, Ayatollah Khalaji had been deeply concerned by the violent clashes occurring in his country and had advocated a peaceful resolution of conflict between the Iranian regime and domestic protesters. Although a prominent cleric and influential orator across Iran, he has never held an official position in the Islamic Republic.

The arrest comes in the midst of a recent crackdown in Qom following large protests that took place there at the funeral of Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, a critic of the regime. Ayatollah Khalaji has been a supporter and admirer of Montazeri.

"My father is a pious religious scholar who has always sought a peaceful solution to the problems facing Iran," Mehdi said today. "It is a sad day for the people of Iran when its government harasses and arrests a humble cleric and deprives him and his family -- including my own young daughter -- of the universal right to travel beyond the borders of their country."

The Washington Institute expresses its heartfelt support to Mehdi and his family and urges the Iranian government to release Ayatollah Khalaji immediately. Given the MOI's track record of withholding information about detainees, we request that all governments, international agencies, and nongovernmental organizations with access in Tehran to take up the case of Ayatollah Khalaji with all the powers at their disposal.

A scholar at The Washington Institute, Mehdi Khalaji is a leading analyst and commentator on the Iranian clerical establishment. Trained by the seminaries of Qom, he was educated in the very heart of Iranian Shiism. In addition to the prolific work he has produced for The Washington Institute, Mehdi has worked for BBC Persian as a political analyst on Iranian affairs, as a broadcaster for the Prague-based Radio Farda, and he sits on the editorial boards of two prominent Iranian periodicals. A legal resident of the United States, Mehdi has been sentenced to jail in absentia by an Iranian clerical court for his outspoken criticism of Iran's Islamic regime.

Media, please contact: Alicia Gansz, director of communications, 202-452-0650,
agansz@washingtoninstitute.org