

The Future of Leadership in the Shiite Community

by [Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](#)

Mehdi Khalaji, a Qom-trained Shiite theologian, was the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.



In-Depth Reports

Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, a former Iranian judiciary chief who holds a prominent position in the Assembly of Experts, now has two paths to leadership of the Shiite community. The first is as a potential successor to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, now seventy-seven; the second is to eventually take the place of Najaf-based Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who at eighty-six is the preeminent religious authority in Shia Islam. A certain air of mystery surrounds Shahroudi, whose life has been chronicled heretofore only in a flattering pamphlet produced by his own office. But the trends in his philosophy are clear enough: on the religious front, he has grown more conservative; in matters of Iranian nationalism, a harder-line revolutionary.

Author [Mehdi Khalaji \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/experts/view/khalaji-mehdi\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/experts/view/khalaji-mehdi) offers here the first comprehensive study of Ayatollah Shahroudi, encompassing his upbringing in holy Najaf, his move to Iran after the Islamic Revolution, his role as a stalwart in Khamenei's power base, and his brutal tenure as chief justice from 1999 to 2009. A scenario worth imagining, though hardly inevitable, is one in which Shahroudi consolidates power as *both* Supreme Leader and transnational *marja*, thereby reinforcing Iran's regional clout and its revolutionary orientation.

The Author

Mehdi Khalaji (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/experts/view/khalaji-mehdi>) is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the politics of Iran and Shiite groups in the Middle East. He was previously a political analyst on Iranian affairs for BBC Persian, and later became a broadcaster for the Prague-based Radio Farda, the Persian-language service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. A scholar of Islam, Khalaji trained in Shiite theology and jurisprudence for fourteen years in the seminaries of Qom; he later studied Shiite theology and exegesis in Paris at L'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes. He is the author of *The New Order of the Clerical Establishment in Iran* (<https://www.amazon.com/Order-Clerical-Establishment-Nazm-Novin/dp/1780830068>) (2010, in Farsi) as well as numerous Institute studies, including *Tightening the Reins: How Khamenei Makes Decisions* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/tightening-the-reins-how-khamenei-makes-decisions>). ❖

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