

Iran's Regime of Religion

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

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



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Accumulation of religious capital in the hands of the government mutually influences the nature of the state and the clerical establishment and will continue to do so in Iran's uncertain future.

Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the Islamic Republic has modernized and bureaucratized the clerical establishment, redefined religion and created institutions to enforce this new definition. The effect has been a transformation of religion into a symbolic form of capital. By monopolizing religious affairs, the political system has become a regime of religion in which the state plays the role of central banker for symbolic religious capital. Consequently, the expansion and monopolization of the religious market have helped the Islamic Republic increase the ranks of its supporters and beneficiaries significantly, even among critics of the government.

This article demonstrates how the accumulation of religious capital in the hands of the government mutually influences the nature of the state and the clerical establishment and will continue to do so in Iran's uncertain future.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the politics of Iran and Shiite groups in the Middle East. ❖

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