

An Interview with Mehdi Khalaji

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, is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.

Born in Qom, Iran, as the son of an ayatollah, Mehdi Khalaji knows what the long path to Shiite scholarship looks like. His father dreamed that he might someday join the ranks of these high scholars as an ayatollah, and from 1986 to 2000, Khalaji studied theology and jurisprudence in the traditional city center. Almost a decade after a difficult decision to leave and pursue his work in journalism and independent scholarly research, Khalaji, now a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, spoke with Foreign Policy's Elizabeth Dickinson about what life in the seminary is like, and why ayatollahs are not made; they are born. Excerpts:

On Growing Up and Entering Seminary

I was sent to the seminary when I was very young -- when I was 11 years old. My father was hoping that someday I would become a grand ayatollah. But I betrayed my father's dreams and I got out of seminary, finally. I studied until the highest level, when you attend courses of the important ayatollahs. I studied Shiite theology, jurisprudence and Islamic philosophy.

Since my father was an ayatollah, I'd been familiar with a clerical life. When [former Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah] Khomeini came to Iran in February 1979, after two months he came to Qom, my father was the one who welcomed him publically. My father was well-known, and he had a good relationship with other revolutionaries. Actually my father was in prison before the revolution.

On Daily Life in Seminary

The daily life of a religious student in my time was much different from what it used to be before the revolution, and from what it is now.

Life was traditional. You get up early morning because you have to pray. Many good clerics even get up at two or three o'clock in the early morning to pray. After the morning prayer, for example at 5 o'clock, 6 o'clock, they start to read. And at 7 o'clock, the courses start. Usually the courses are 45 minutes. Each student chooses a fellow [student] to discuss each course with him each day. Sometimes I play the role of teacher for you; I teach you the same thing I was taught yesterday. If I say anything wrong, you correct me. Tomorrow you're going to be my teacher. In this way, [students] repeat the courses and correct each others' possible misunderstandings. Usually, you take three or four courses per day.

At noon, you go back to your home or, if you live in a traditional school, you go to the school. You eat something, and you get some rest. At four o'clock, you start your classes until sunset. At sunset, you pray your sunset prayer. After

that, you go home and you start to read. You go to bed early because you have to get up early.

That was the typical life at that time. But now, everything is mistaught, after [current Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali] Khamenei injected lots of money into the clerical establishments. They destroyed the traditional structure and the educational program. They created some schools that are more like a military base rather than a traditional, clerical school. And every morning, [the students] do something like a parade, which is a military practice, not a clerical practice.

On Reasons for Entering Seminary

In my time, nobody went to the seminary to gain money or credits, because in the society it wasn't one of the favorite jobs you could have. Before the revolution, [attendance] was based on religious convictions and your own personal decision -- the feeling of religious responsibility. After revolution, people were agreeing to go to seminary because they had been revolutionary idealists. They were looking at the seminary as a place for ideological training.

But gradually, clerics were put in charge of sensitive positions. Being a cleric meant that you could gain lots of political power and economic advantages. So now, people are not going to the seminary for the study of religion; people are going because the seminary became a place for training employees for the government. They are going to become wealthy and to become close to the political circles. After 30 years, the new generation of the seminary is intellectually very poor but economically very rich -- just the opposite of what it used to be.

On Who Can Enter Seminary

When I entered the seminary, there was no ideological control; everybody was free to enter the seminary, provided that he attend the courses and pass the exams. But if you want to enter the seminary since Khamenei came to power 20 years ago, you have to pass an ideological investigation. They investigate where you are coming from, how your family is in terms of loyalty to the government, whether any member of your family was involved in political activities, and whether your family is religious or not.

What I've said in some of my writings is that Khamenei has modernized the seminary, bureaucratized the seminary, and through modernization, put control over the seminary. We were free to attend any course we wanted. But now, it's like entering the military. In my time, everyone was allowed to teach, and I was free to choose my teacher: volunteer teacher, volunteer student. Now? You cannot choose your teacher, nor your student.

On Leaving the Seminary

I'm part of the generation that entered the seminary after the [Iranian] revolution. We had some illusions about Islamic ideology, and we thought that the Islamic ideology was like its leader's promise -- able to provide worldly happiness, and otherworldly salvation. Islamic ideology provides everything that other ideologies provide for you, like economic growth, freedom of speech, and cultural flourishing, but there is also an added value: While liberalism doesn't promise anything for you when you die, Islamic ideology will provide you with salvation in the afterlife. This is what we were thinking -- this utopian world that we would believe in. But after a decade, we found that the result was not so promising.

Actually, when clerics got power, they started to eliminate other groups, political groups, and political figures who were involved in the revolution. For example, many prominent clerics lived [near us in Qom], and our next-door neighbor was a cleric who had been a member of the parliament since I was a kid. Suddenly, we found out that he had been executed. He had some boys, I think one or two, who were the same age I was at that time. We'd been watching their suffering, and it was really painful. Many clerics who really believed in Islamic ideology and were active in the period of the revolution -- just because they criticized Khomeini, they'd been kicked out, put in jail, executed, or tortured. This was one of the reasons that we thought "OK, this wouldn't work. What we wanted was not

this; this is against the romantic perception of the Islamic utopia."

Second, what was very influential for me was the emergence of the religious intellectuals, especially Abdolkarim Soroush. Dr. Soroush started to come to Qom when I was 17 years old. I was going to his class every Thursday in a small house. We were discreetly attending, because clerics were mad at him for teaching a different interpretation of Islam. Dr. Soroush opened the eyes of me and many other clerics of my generation to modernity, to Western philosophy, and how to look at Islam from a modern perspective.

Finally, I started to study Western philosophy and especially Immanuel Kant, who was very influential for me, and the modern philosophers like Nietzsche and other philosophers like him -- Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, Derrida, and so on. Through philosophy, I started to criticize theology.

On Moqtada al-Sadr

Nobody can decide to go to the seminary and study and become an ayatollah. Becoming an ayatollah is not something like getting a degree. You can get a Ph.D. in philosophy. It's possible. But in the seminary, an ayatollah is the equivalent to a theoretician. We have thousands of people in the world who have Ph.D.s in philosophy, but we have few people who are really philosophers -- who introduce new theories and philosophies.

We have many people who have studied 30 years, they are very old -- like 70 years old -- but they are not an ayatollah yet. You can be an ayatollah when you are young or when you are middle aged, provided that you are very intelligent and you study very hard, and you are a dedicated person. You just don't want to get it quickly and go back to Iraq and get involved again in the Mahdi Army. It's not the way that system works.

It is extremely ridiculous to hear Moqtada al-Sadr say "I'm studying to become an ayatollah." It really doesn't make sense in any language but English. If [he says] this in Farsi or Arabic, everybody ridicules him. So he can say this only to foreign media.

Also, if you want to study at the highest level in theology, whether in Qom or Najaf or other seminaries, you have to attend the important courses taught by big figures. Big figures don't teach clandestine[ly]; they teach in the mosque, and many people attempt their courses. In the course of the last few years when Moqtada claims that he has been in Qom to study religion in order to become an ayatollah, nobody has seen him in these courses. So where is he? I don't know. What he does, I don't know. But we have to be very clear: Nobody talks about him because nobody sees him in Qom.

Mehdi Khalaji is senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Elizabeth Dickinson is assistant editor at Foreign Policy. ❖

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