

# Shahram Irani: Artesh Navy Commander

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In August 2021, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei [appointed](#) Admiral Shahram Irani as the Artesh Navy commander. The Artesh and [the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#) constitute the bifurcated military system in the Islamic Republic. The IRGC was established following the 1979 revolution as a check against the Artesh, which the clerics suspected for its ties to the Pahlavi monarchy. Consequently, the IRGC continues to hold the upper hand in terms of political influence. Irani is an ethnic Kurd and Sunni Muslim who faced discrimination in the Islamic Republic. While Irani's appointment could at first seem like a milestone for minority representation, key posts in the military establishment, especially IRGC, are typically reserved for Shiites.

## **Military career**

[Born](#) in 1967 in the predominantly Sunni-Kurd city of Sanandaj in western Iran, Irani enlisted in Imam Khomeini Naval Sciences University, the naval officer academy of the Artesh located in the northern port city of Noshahr, in 1985. After graduating, Irani was placed in command of various light and heavy warships. He subsequently acquired an advanced command and headquarters degree and served in a variety of roles at the naval command academy, and naval officer academy, respectively.

Irani's command posts have included Artesh Navy Training Directorate commander and deputy commander and Navy Operations Directorate commander. He has also served as operations commander, deputy commander, and commander of Artesh Naval Area One Operations stationed in Bandar-e Abbas. Irani commanded Artesh naval group missions, including one that transited the Suez Canal in 2012, a signal of the Islamic Republic's ability to project naval power.

## **What does Irani's appointment mean**

Irani faces challenges in modernizing the Artesh fleet, which will require billions of dollars in investment and a willingness of Russia and China to sell their advanced naval systems to Iran.

Dating back to the pre-revolution era, the Artesh Navy's fleet is [constituted](#) primarily by traditional surface ships and submarines. The IRGC Navy, on the other hand, has focused on asymmetric doctrine, fast-attack boats, anti-ship cruise missiles, and mines, as [discussed](#) in an in-depth study on the Islamic Republic Navy by the Office of Naval Intelligence. The IRGC Navy is in charge of the Persian Gulf area, while the Artesh Navy oversees the Gulf of Oman. Artesh commanders have signaled their ambition to become a regional power in the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean. To do so, the navy would need to modernize and reconstitute its aging fleet, most of which date back to the 1960s and 1970s. The Artesh Navy has acquired some Russian

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and Chinese systems and training in the past 20 years and [hopes](#) to expand naval ties with those two global powers going forward.

State and state-linked media have [framed](#) Irani's appointment as a sign that the Islamic Republic does not discriminate based on ethnicity or sect. However, as mentioned earlier, top posts, especially in the IRGC, are reserved for Shiite Muslims, who are the majority sect in Iran but 10-15% of Muslims worldwide. The contrast is stark when considering [promotions](#) Kurdish Shiites have received compared to Kurdish Sunnis. The IRGC has deployed units from the Kurdish Shiite area to Syria, whereas virtually no known Kurd Sunnis have deployed there. The Kurdish [Sunnis](#) who did fight abroad did so alongside Salafi-Jihadist groups like ISIS.

Another noteworthy development is that Irani, unlike his predecessors, did not witness significant combat during the Iran-Iraq War. The generation that forged its career and ties in the war is retiring, and the next generation of officer corps is taking the reins. These commanders are carefully vetted for their loyalties to the Islamic Republic and the Supreme Leader, and Irani is no exception.