

# Shahram Irani: Artesh Navy Commander

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## *Shahram Irani*

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 an ideological army and 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 military, economic, and political influence. Irani is an ethnic Kurd and Sunni Muslim – two minorities that have faced consistent discrimination in the Islamic Republic. While state-run propaganda has sought to depict Irani’s appointment as evidence that the Islamic Republic does not discriminate along ethnic or sectarian lines, this could not be further from the truth, with minority discrimination significantly [increasing](#) in recent years.

## *Military career*

Irani was [born](#) in 1967 in the predominantly Sunni-Kurd city of Sanandaj in western Iran. In 1985, he enrolled in Imam Khomeini Naval Sciences University, the Artesh Naval, located in the northern port city of Noshahr. 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.

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

## *Artesh Navy Commander*

In August of 2021, Irani was [appointed](#) as Artesh Navy Commander by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. While state and state-linked media [framed](#) this as a sign that the Islamic Republic does not discriminate based on ethnicity or sect, Irani’s appointment should be understood in the context of Khamenei’s [“Second Phase of the Islamic Revolution”](#) manifesto. Launched in 2019, the Supreme Leader’s “Second Phase” project is geared towards [“purifying”](#) the regime by installing a new generation of Khamenei loyalists in key positions, not least across the security-military infrastructure of the Islamic Republic. In implementing these changes, Khamenei has finally been able to complete his decades-long personalization of power projects across the conventional and unconventional apparatus of the system. Irani’s appointment should be understood in this context, with the Artesh Navy Commander being part of Khamenei’s cult of personality.

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Irani's appointment has come at a transitional period. Since the pre-revolution era, the Artesh Navy's fleet has been [constituted](#) of primarily 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. The Persian Gulf area falls under IRGC jurisdiction, while the Artesh Navy oversees the Gulf of Oman, Red Sea, and "out of area" operations. 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 must modernize and reconstitute its aging fleet, most of which date back to the 1960s and 1970s. The Artesh Navy has made some progress, by acquiring Russian and Chinese systems and training in the past 20 years and [has sought](#) expanded naval ties with these states.

Irani has continued to face structural challenges in modernizing the Artesh fleet. Improving its operational capacity will require billions of dollars in investment and the willingness of Russia and China to sell their advanced naval systems to Iran. Despite some new acquisitions (including "[stealth vessels](#)"), the fleet has become increasingly dependent upon indigenously produced [drones and missiles](#).

However, Irani has also succeeded in some respects. He has coordinated with the IRGC to [enhance the naval capability of proxy groups](#), like the Houthis, Hezbollah, and Iraqi militias. Additionally, he has succeeded in commanding some long-distance operations, including [patrols](#) in the [Red Sea](#), [participation](#) in Russian naval parades, and [tours](#) in Latin America. He has also spearheaded naval diplomacy efforts to strengthen ties with states like [Russia](#), [Pakistan](#), [China](#), and [South Africa](#), and led Iran's participation in joint [exercises](#).

These activities will likely continue as Irani seeks to enhance the Artesh Navy, and US naval activities in the region [intensify](#). Additionally, it is noteworthy 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.