

Profile: Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani

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Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani

Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), is one of Iran's leading strategists. His credentials span the spectrum of Tehran's various power centers, including the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC), the Islamic Republic's regular military (Artesh), and the Ministry of Defense and Logistics (MODAFL), to name a few. There is evidence to suggest that Shamkhani has become more influential recently, particularly following the death of former IRGC-Quds Force Commander [Qassem Soleimani](#). This profile will explore Shamkhani's experience at the helm of multiple organs within Iran's armed, deep, and elected states, which provide him with a unique perspective that other regime officials lack.

Early Years and Path to Power

Ali Shamkhani was born in 1955 in Ahvaz. Shamkhani hails from an ethnic Arab family, which makes his rise within the ranks of the Islamic Republic all the more noteworthy. After graduating from high school, he visited Los Angeles with his father and brothers, but later left, [telling](#) the Los Angeles Times, "I didn't approve of the culture." Shamkhani then studied engineering at Ahvaz University, and amassed revolutionary credentials as a member of an underground organization, [Mansouroun](#), fighting the Pahlavi monarchy. [According](#) to scholar Ali Alfoneh, it was in Mansouroun that Shamkhani met Mohsen Rezaee, who later became commander-in-chief of the IRGC. Shamkhani initially [served](#) as the IRGC's commander in Khuzestan Province, with Rezaee later promoting Shamkhani as his deputy commander-in-chief. Shamkhani simultaneously [commanded](#) the IRGC-Ground Forces, having been appointed in May 1986.

Fixture of Iran's Armed State

During the Iran-Iraq War, Shamkhani gained exposure to key regime figures, which would contribute to his rise, including the founder of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Speaker of Parliament Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Shamkhani reportedly [complained](#) bitterly about Ayatollah Khomeini's IRGC representative, Fazlollah Mahallati, in IRGC operations during the war and authored a letter to the supreme leader and liaising with Rafsanjani on the issue. Likewise, in May 1986, he [briefed](#) Rafsanjani on a "bitter report of retreats" with future IRGC-Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani and future IRGC-Air Force Commander Mohammad-Baqer Qalibaf. It's this generation of Iran-Iraq War veterans who later populated the top ranks of the regime.

In 1988, Shamkhani replaced Mohsen Rafighdoost as minister of the IRGC. That didn't last for long as the Islamic Republic reorganized its security apparatus in 1989 upon the ascension of Ali Khamenei as supreme leader. Specifically, after the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq War, Iran's Ministry of Defense was restructured, and the Ministry of the Revolutionary Guards was [folded](#) into MODAFL. In 1989, Shamkhani became commander of the Islamic Republic's Artesh Navy. During the announcement of his appointment, Khamenei [noted](#) that Shamkhani was selected for his "valuable services and great endeavors in the scenes of war and victorious missions, and the

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sensitive duties in the Islamic Republic Guard Corps.” The context of this appointment was also notable—he [replaced](#) Rear Admiral Mohammad-Hussein Malekzadegan who served at the helm for the last three years of the Iran-Iraq War during which the U.S. Navy [sunk](#) the Iran Ajr and carried out Operation Praying Mantis which [destroyed](#) roughly half of Iran’s Navy. Shamkhani [appointed](#) another IRGC officer, Abbas Mohtaj, as his deputy in the Artesh Navy. Shamkhani’s appointment to commander of Iran’s Artesh Navy is evidence that Khamenei was entrusting the IRGC with leading the period of naval rebuilding for the Artesh.

Shamkhani was subsequently awarded his second, simultaneous command as the commander of the IRGC-Navy. He had previously held a dual command during the Iran-Iraq War when he served as deputy commander-in-chief and commander of the IRGC-Ground Forces. During his tenure, Shamkhani mostly stuck to the Islamic Republic’s traditional messaging over the Persian Gulf, [saying](#) “the presence of foreign warships...disturbs regional security” and [warning](#) from “the north to the south of the Persian Gulf, we have the capability to install missile sites.” He also [highlighted](#) Iran’s naval priorities, particularly the need to learn lessons from the Iran-Iraq War, engage in military exercises, and promote “self-sufficiency in military industries.”

There are accounts of Shamkhani during his naval years threatening to prevent Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq from using the Persian Gulf. But there was more afoot here given the regional dynamic after the Iran-Iraq War. As scholar Kenneth Katzman once [noted](#), “Shamkhani’s threat was virtually simultaneous, and contradictory, with Rafsanjani’s efforts to advance a final peace settlement with Iraq.” Overall, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy’s Farzin Adimi has argued Shamkhani’s joint naval legacy during this period was [defined](#) by “laying the foundation for better interoperability by establishing the Khatam al-Anbia General Naval Headquarters.”

Politics

In 1997, a reformist and former Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Mohammad Khatami won the Iranian presidency. Khatami and Shamkhani knew each other as fellow cabinet ministers during the last year of the administration of Mir-Hossein Mousavi, before the office of the prime minister was abolished. Khatami subsequently named Shamkhani as minister of defense, a position that historically [required](#) coordination and consultation with the supreme leader before being filled. The position is not a traditional defense ministerial portfolio because it is [not](#) in the military chain of command and [focuses](#) mostly on planning and equipping Iran’s Armed Forces.

After Khatami was elected, some observers [dubbed](#) him “Ayatollah Gorbachev” as a result of his [call](#) for a “dialogue among civilizations.” This new tone of conciliation rather than confrontation can be seen in Shamkhani’s remarks from that period. Early in his tenure at MODAFL, when the U.S.S. Nimitz was in the Persian Gulf as a part of Southern Watch after the Gulf War, Shamkhani [told](#) the media “[w]e don’t see any reason for friction, but we cannot speak about the belligerence of the other side.” While Iran had reasons to moderate its public tone towards the United States at the time, because of its traditional enmity towards Saddam Hussein, such commentary is nevertheless noteworthy given Shamkhani’s more bellicose rhetoric in the past.

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The head of U.S. Central Command said the Khatami election had [resulted](#) in a “more polite and professional attitude” in the Persian Gulf.

Khatami’s administration also used Shamkhani to build bridges with the Arab world, particularly Saudi Arabia. Given his ethnic Arab roots, he was a natural envoy. Shamkhani made a groundbreaking [trip](#) to Saudi Arabia during his tenure. To recognize Shamkhani for his efforts at serving as an envoy, Saudi Arabia later [awarded](#) him the Order of Abdulaziz al-Saud. To date, Shamkhani is the only Iranian to receive the award since 1979.

During the July 1999 student demonstrations, Shamkhani found himself in an uncomfortable position. Protests [formed](#) over the decision to shutter a leading newspaper “Salaam” and attempts at tightening a press freedom law. A police raid on a Tehran University dormitory soon followed, which prompted a statement from the Khatami-run SNSC that [described](#) the raid as “intolerable.” Shamkhani, as defense minister, was part of the Khatami administration. But while Khatami attempted to appear sympathetic towards the student demonstrators, he found himself in the crosshairs of the IRGC. Senior commanders penned a [threatening letter](#) to Khatami, questioning his ability to lead. Two of its signatories were Shamkhani’s former IRGC comrades Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf and Qassem Soleimani.

Despite Khatami’s attempts to placate the students, Shamkhani’s public remarks at the time mostly emphasized law and order. He [remarked](#), “[w]e will restore peace at any cost in Iran...All of the authorities agree that nobody should cross three red lines of Islamic Rule, velayat-e faqih, and Ayatollah Khamenei as the symbol of the first two pillars.” Shamkhani also [accused](#) the foreign press of exploiting Iran’s domestic unrest, charging “we are going to end this much-favored filmmaking session by the satanic global arrogance and Zionism, so as to prevent any further damage to the justice-seeking reputation of our students.” He may have been attempting, in part, to protect his right-flank, given the withering criticism Khatami had been receiving from leaders of the IRGC. Such an episode suggests crafty political positioning on the part of Shamkhani, keeping his IRGC credibility and pedigree in-tact, with perhaps an eye to run for elective office.

One of the most curious episodes of Shamkhani’s tenure as defense minister occurred in 2001, when he ran for president at the same time as the man who appointed him, Mohammad Khatami, ran for reelection. Shamkhani [explained](#) the decision to run as a “rivalry in friendship” and that he [intended](#) to build a “strong administration that will be able to stand on its own in the international arena.” He [said](#) Khatami was responsible for “factionalism” and that the “difference between me and the rest of the contenders is that a president needs two specific characteristics: first, the ability to operate and decide quickly and decisively and second, enjoying the trust of the people...I have the authority to take action instead of mouthing slogans.” Shamkhani also [emphasized](#) his run as a demonstration that a “military man” could run for elective office. He wound up losing the race—[receiving](#) only 2.62% of votes cast—but the experience demonstrated his ambition and canny political calculations. Even though he served in a reformist administration, Shamkhani still attempted to preserve and present his military credentials.

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Shamkhani continued as defense minister until the end of Khatami's second term in 2005 and wound up being the longest-serving defense minister in the history of the Islamic Republic. A survey of his public remarks from his second term indicates that while he often employed the standard messaging from officials of the Islamic Republic—references to Israeli and American conspiracies and fealty to the supreme leader—Shamkhani has often been more tempered than some of his former IRGC colleagues, focusing more on strategy than bombast.

For instance, during his second term as defense minister in 2002, Iraqi media [cited](#) comments he made saying U.S. aircraft would not be treated as hostile if they mistakenly entered Iranian airspace while performing military operations against the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. But the Iranian Foreign Ministry later clarified that any violations of its airspace would not be tolerated. In 2003, he [outlined](#) Iran's defense doctrine in Iranian media, as one based on "strategic deterrent defense...Deterrent defense means that in no way will Iran take an offensive measure. We are in struggle to sustain the enemy's first strike. The first strike will not lead to surrender, but it should be seen as a warning. Under these conditions, if there is the [capability] to sustain a first strike, there is a basis for [Iranian] secondary resistance against the threats. Thus, Iran's objectives are of a defensive nature." In 2005, he also [sought](#) to reassure Europe that Iran would adhere to a range of 2,000 km for its ballistic missiles, claiming Tehran "was aware of this sensitivity" but any news to the contrary was a Zionist conspiracy.

Thus, Shamkhani comes across as a careful strategist—both politically and militarily. Politically, he attempted to preserve his credibility within the IRGC while simultaneously serving as a cabinet minister in a reformist government, of whom his old colleagues remained skeptical and suspicious. Militarily, Shamkhani laced his public remarks with enough Islamic Republic revolutionary dogma so that he could continue to survive and thrive within the halls of power, while retaining his credibility as a strategist.

Exile in the Deep State

The Khatami era came to an end following hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory in the 2005 presidential elections. But the supreme leader quickly found landing spots for Shamkhani on the multitude of advisory councils and think tanks his office controls—which make up part of Iran's deep state. Shamkhani was named as a member of the Strategic Council for Foreign Relations, which was formed in 2006. Another fellow minister from Khatami's cabinet, former Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi, was [named](#) the head of the council, and he explained that Khamenei "sensed a deficiency" in strategy in Iran's foreign policy, with the Strategic Council for Foreign Relations playing a role in filling the gaps. In addition to this role, press [accounts](#) from this period depict Shamkhani as a military advisor to the supreme leader as well as the [head](#) of the Iranian Armed Forces Center for Strategic Studies.

After Iran's disputed 2009 election, observers [noted](#) that Shamkhani did not condemn Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karubi, Iran's former prime minister and speaker of parliament, who faced off against Ahmadinejad in 2009, despite being personae non gratae after being placed

under house arrest. Shamkhani again reveals canny political positioning that preserves credibility among the reformists while simultaneously protecting his brand as a military man.

The Supreme National Security Council

Shamkhani returned from the shadows of Iran's deep state after Hassan Rouhani won the presidency in 2013. Rouhani campaigned on a platform of prudence and hope, and installed many seasoned ministers in his cabinet. As he populated his administration, Rouhani [named](#) Shamkhani as the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council. Shamkhani's elevation was noteworthy in two respects: (1) he would be the first SNSC secretary in the history of the Islamic Republic to have commanded an arm of the IRGC—in Shamkhani's case Iran's Navy and Ground Forces; and (2) he was simultaneously [appointed](#) by Khamenei as his personal representative on the SNSC. Such status provided Shamkhani with the imprimatur of Khamenei and Rouhani.

However, there were limits to his power. Despite Shamkhani's sterling credentials and rank, the Rouhani administration [transferred](#) the nuclear file out of the SNSC and to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, headed by Javad Zarif. Previously, the SNSC secretaries had been Iran's chief nuclear negotiators—Hassan Rouhani, Ali Larijani, and Saeed Jalili were the point men. Now, Iran's foreign minister would take the lead. His appointment also raised [hopes](#) that Mousavi and Karroubi would be released from house arrest. But to date, they remain confined.

Shamkhani also reprised his role as an interlocutor with the Arab world. He has [spoken](#) in Arabic at events like Hamas' Quds Day, telling his audience, "As Ali Khamenei said—Palestine is from the river to the sea, and there is no doubt that Jerusalem is its capital, and within two decades, there will be no such thing called Israel." After the attack on Saudi Arabia's Aramco facilities in September 2019, Shamkhani was a [prominent](#) public voice, saying, "Iran's strategic policy is to reduce tensions, avoid any conflict, and resolve regional crises through dialogue. However, the country is fully prepared to monitor any intention or attempt to attack the Islamic Republic or its interests and will surprise aggressors most severely through a crushing and comprehensive response to possible evil actions."

In the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA during the Trump administration, Shamkhani [hinted](#) that Iran should have never signed the agreement in the first place, with perhaps an eye on his future as a potential interlocutor with the West. Indeed, there is evidence Washington may view Shamkhani as someone with whom they can do business after Shamkhani [revealed](#) that while he was in Afghanistan, he was approached by U.S. officials seeking to negotiate. While the U.S. State Department denied the report, the United States has been searching for a more powerful interlocutor than Javad Zarif. Shamkhani's experience across the different power centers of Iran makes him a potential candidate.

Shamkhani has also seen his profile rise after the death of Qassem Soleimani. He is a natural fit to fill the vacuum after Soleimani's demise, given his status as an ethnic Arab and ability to relate to the multitude of militias Soleimani managed and manipulated. Soleimani's successor, [Esmail](#)

[Ghaani](#), lacks a command of Arabic and does not share Shamkhani’s stature within the regime, given the breadth and depth of his experience.

After Iran retaliated for Soleimani’s death by launching ballistic missiles at U.S. forces in Iraq, Shamkhani was [sanctioned](#) by the U.S. government, which highlighted his “involvement and complicity” in the attack. It was the first time the U.S. government had sanctioned a sitting SNSC secretary, and notably, in a sign of his importance, Shamkhani was the only Rouhani appointee sanctioned alongside a tranche of Khamenei’s men. Soon after, in March 2020, Shamkhani made an important [trip](#) to Iraq, as its leaders struggled with government formation. During the visit, he used similar messaging to the Iran-backed Shiite militias, [arguing](#) that the “countdown for the expulsion of America from the region” had begun. A few days after this visit, on March 11, an [attack](#), believed to be coordinated by Iran-backed Shiite militias, on a coalition base killed three servicemembers—specifically two Americans and one British. Such activities are evidence of potential coordination, and more importantly, Shamkhani’s increasing stature in Tehran.

But his tenure as SNSC secretary hasn’t been without controversy. A cleric in 2019 [accused](#) Shamkhani, his wife, and family of involvement in corrupt business dealings, specifically construction and real estate projects. There have been similar accusations against his son-in-law over construction in Lavasan.

Shamkhani himself [may](#) be weighing another run for the presidency in 2021. A reformist journalist in Iran [reported](#) Shamkhani had been holding regular meetings with former IRGC Commander-in-Chief Mohsen Rezaei and former Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan to discuss the prospect of a military man running for president in the next election. While Shamkhani has already run once before, if he chose to run in 2021, he wouldn’t be facing off against an incumbent president who happened to also be his boss. However, he would have to contend with his protégé, [Hossein Dehghan](#), who also served as his deputy defense minister, branding himself as a cross-factional candidate—similar to the brand Shamkhani has built during his own career.

Conclusion

Ali Shamkhani’s career has positioned him at the pinnacle of power among Iran’s armed, elected, and deep states. His experience in both the Artesh and the IRGC, coupled with his role as a cabinet minister and later SNSC secretary, has provided him with a broad perspective that other players in Iran’s regime lack. That Shamkhani happens to be an ethnic Arab has also put him on the radar as a natural envoy, emissary, and spokesman for the regime in the Arab world.

At the same time, Shamkhani has proven politically calculating and cunning—preserving goodwill among reformists, the clerical establishment, and elements of the IRGC alike. However, such an approach has alienated some voices within those very same constituencies. With Hassan Rouhani in the twilight of his presidency and the regime still trying to fill the vacuum left by Soleimani’s death, Shamkhani’s career progression will be important to monitor.