



## New era for Esteghlal as fans' favorite Nekounam takes charge

### Sports Desk

Weeks of speculations over the future of Esteghlal's bench came to an end on Tuesday after former Iranian international midfielder Javad Nekounam was named as the new manager of the Persian Gulf Pro giant. Numerous names were brought up in the Iranian media over the last fortnight, including Spanish coaches Juan Ramón López Caro and Quique Sánchez Flores as well as ex-Mes Rafsanjan boss Mohammad Rabiei, though it was always a matter of time before the 42-year-old manager – backed by the majority of the club faithful – would win the race for the Tehran Blues' job. Nekounam takes over from passionate Portuguese Ricardo Sa Pinto, who ended his season-long stint at the club – best remembered by touchline rows with the referees and the opposition camps – after a third-spot finish in the league and a 2-1 defeat against Persepolis in the Hazfi Cup final to join Cypriot side APOEL Nicosia.

The frustrating quest for a new head coach in the preseason has been a constant scenario for Esteghlal fans in recent years as Nekounam will be the seventh manager in as many seasons to start a new league campaign on the Blues bench. "Welcome home dear Javad. Your arrival at Esteghlal as a player was followed by silverware. Let's hope you will also lift the championship trophy as the manager," Esteghlal wrote on social media when

announcing the appointment of Nekounam, who won the domestic league title with Esteghlal in his first season back in the Iranian club football in 2012 – in the latter stages of an illustrious career, which included a six-year spell at La Liga club Osasuna.

The most capped player in the history of the national team with 151 appearances under his belt, Nekounam had been without a team since leaving Foolad Khuzestan in the most controversial fashion in February.

Having led the southern Iranian club to a maiden knockout spot in the AFC Champions League, Nekou stepped down from his role right after a 1-0 victory over Saudi club Al Faisaly in the last-16 round in Doha over a rift with the new club board, before Foolad's run at the continent's elite clubs competition came to an end by Al Hilal days later.

Nekounam will begin a new chapter in his career on the back of a decent run with Nassaji Mazandaran and Foolad, as he steered the former to a first promotion for the Iranian Pro League in 2018, before winning the domestic cup and Super Cup trophies with Foolad. However, the Iranian is fully aware of the size of the new task in Esteghlal which is in stark contrast with all he has ever faced in his previous teams.

Expectations will be sky high in the capital as the Blues fans will be eager to see Nekounam end the dominance of their archrival and reigning domestic double champion Persepolis

over the Iranian top flight since 2017 – a feat only achieved by former Esteghlal coach Farhad Majidi in the 2021/22 season.

A long-time admirer and protégé of Iran's former Portuguese head coach Carlos Queiroz, who has also been outspoken in praising Atletico Madrid's Argentine tactician Diego Simeone as a managerial role model, Nekounam is best known for adopting an accurate defensive gameplan against stronger oppositions. That is the kind of approach that helped his Foolad team hold Persepolis to a goalless draw at the Azadi Stadium last season before walking away with a 1-0 victory in the reverse fixture at home.

His recent record against Persepolis coach Yahya Golmohammadi surely offers hope among Esteghlal supporters for a first derby victory in the league since March 2018.

Nekounam also knows how important it will be to get off to a decent start in the new season to avoid an early pressure from the stands and the club hierarchy.

To that end, he needs to make sure he will make the right signings in certain positions in what was blamed as an unbalanced squad last season, while retaining the star players of Sa Pinto's team, most significantly frontline international duo Mehdi Qayedi and Mohammad Mohebbi, who are at end of their loan spells at the club, and versatile Frenchman Kevin Yanga – reportedly on the Portuguese's wishlist in his new job.

### Beiranvand to undergo surgery on fractured jaw



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Iran goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand said he will have to undergo surgery on his fractured jaw after being forced out injured during a 1-0 victory over Uzbekistan in the CAFA Nations Cup final on Tuesday.

Persepolis keeper suffered the damage when he collided with teammate Saeed Ezzatollahi with six minutes into the game in Tashkent's Milliy Stadium.

Leverkusen striker Sardar Azmoun scored the winner three minutes after the break, wrongfooting Uzbekistan keeper Utkir Yusupov with a wonderful drive after being teed up by Mehdi Taremi.

### Murray will not 'overreact' to early Queen's exit



PETER CZIBORRA/REUTERS

REUTERS – Andy Murray said he will not "overreact" to his opening round exit at the Queen's Club Championships after Tuesday's 6-3 6-1 defeat by Alex de Minaur ended the three-time Grand Slam winner's hopes of securing a seeding at Wimbledon.

The 36-year-old Scot, who has won Queen's a record five times, came into the match on the back of winning back-to-back grass-court titles at the Surbiton Trophy and Nottingham Open this month.

"Obviously after today, it's easy to overreact," said former world number one Murray, who has resurrected his career after hip resurfacing surgery. "I lost to a good player and it was obviously very comfortable."

"But at the same time, over the past couple of weeks, yes, it's obviously not the same level of opponents, but I won the (Nottingham Open) last week without dropping a set."

"I only lost one set in Surbiton. Was holding serve very comfortably. Was moving well, hitting the ball well. There are a lot of positive signs there."

Murray, who is now ranked number 38 in the world, opted to skip tournaments in the recent clay court swing to focus on the grass court season as he bids for a third Wimbledon title. This year's grass court Grand Slam runs from July 3-16.

## EURO 2024 qualifiers: Ronaldo nets winner on historic 200th Portugal cap; Haaland fires Norway

AFP – Cristiano Ronaldo marked his 200th international appearance with the winner as Portugal beat Iceland 1-0 in Euro 2024 qualifying on Tuesday, while Erling Haaland netted twice for Norway.

Ronaldo struggled for much of the match but repaid coach Roberto Martinez's faith by slotting home from Goncalo Inacio's knock-down in the 89th minute.

"It was a nice script (for Ronaldo). There was incredible celebration, the first men's player ever in world football to get 200 international games," Martinez told uefa.com.

"For me it's an unbelievable achievement, it's amazing," said the 38-year-old Ronaldo. "And of course to score the winning goal, it's even more special."

Portugal remain two points clear of Slovakia at the top of Group J after a fourth straight win.

Slovakia, who are Portugal's next opponents in September, won 1-0 away to Liechtenstein to stay unbeaten.

Luxembourg gave their unlikely bid to reach a maiden major tournament a boost with a brilliant 2-0 away victory over Bosnia and Herzegovina to move third, just three points behind Slovakia.

The top two from each group qualify automatically for next year's finals in Germany. Elsewhere, Belgium brushed aside the Thibaut Courtois captaincy row by seeing off Estonia thanks to a Romelu Lukaku double in Tallinn and Moldova came from two goals down to stun Poland.



Portugal captain Cristiano Ronaldo celebrates after scoring the winner in a 1-0 victory over Iceland in the Euro 2024 qualifiers in Reykjavik, Iceland, on June 20, 2023.

AP

Belgium goalkeeper Courtois had said he was "surprised" that coach Domenico Tedesco told a press conference he had refused to travel to Estonia after being overlooked for the stand-in captaincy last week. Tedesco had wanted to hand Lukaku the armband for Saturday's 1-1 draw with Austria and give Courtois the honour in Tallinn, with regular captain Kevin De Bruyne absent.

But with Courtois instead back home, Lukaku was named skipper again and responded by scoring two goals in a 3-0 success which helped Belgium stay second in Group F.

Austria remained three points clear in first place, albeit having played a game more than Belgium, as Christoph Baumgartner scored twice in the last 10 minutes to clinch a 2-0 win over Sweden.

Haaland's brace helped Norway bounce back from their dramatic defeat by Scotland at the weekend with a 3-1 victory against Cyprus.

That kept their slim hopes of reaching a first major tournament since 2000 alive, although they only sit third in Group A and just one point ahead of Spain having played two games more than the three-time champions.

Group leaders Scotland were not blown off course by a near two-hour interruption caused by heavy rain as they maintained their 100 percent record with a 2-0 win over Georgia.

Poland fell to fourth place in Group E after blowing a two-goal lead to lose 3-2 to Moldova in Chisinau.

Moldova, who had won only one of their last 43 Euro and World Cup qualifying matches, appeared to have been safely dispatched by first-half goals from Arkadiusz Milik and Robert Lewandowski.

But Ion Nicolaescu's double left Poland reeling and Vladyslav Baboglo, who plays his club football for Ukrainian team Oleksandriya, headed past Wojciech Szczesny to score a dramatic 85th-minute winner. Moldova, 171st in the FIFA rankings, are now third in the group standings, a point behind second-placed Albania who saw off the Faroe Islands 3-1.

Hungary moved top of Group G by cruising past Lithuania 2-0, level on points with Serbia after their 1-1 draw with Bulgaria.