

## AFC Asian Cup:

## Reality check for lackluster Iran after laboring to Hong Kong win

## Sports Desk

A narrow 1-0 victory over Hong Kong was enough for Iran to secure a place in the AFC Asian Cup knockouts but head coach Amir Qalenoee was left with plenty to think about ahead of the encounters with more formidable oppositions in Qatar. Often clueless in front of the goal and vulnerable in the backline, the Asian powerhouse had Mahdi Qayedi, who received a surprise callup on the eve of the tournament, to thank for the maximum points against an opponent that had been well-beaten by four goals when the two sides met in the World Cup qualifiers in November.

The 25-year-old bagged his second goal in Qatar in the 24th minute, when his composed effort from a tight angle found the bottom corner.

The result means a draw against the United Arab Emirates on Tuesday will see Iran progress as the Group C winner and get a test against an Asian minnow side in the last 16, but with Japan and South Korea on the horizon in the quarterfinals, Qalenoee, who was clearly frustrated on the touchline through the 90 minutes, knows there is much to improve if his team is to end a 48-year drought in the continent's flagship international event.

"We somehow managed to win the game and stay on top of the group but the performance was definitely not what we were expecting," said Iranian striker

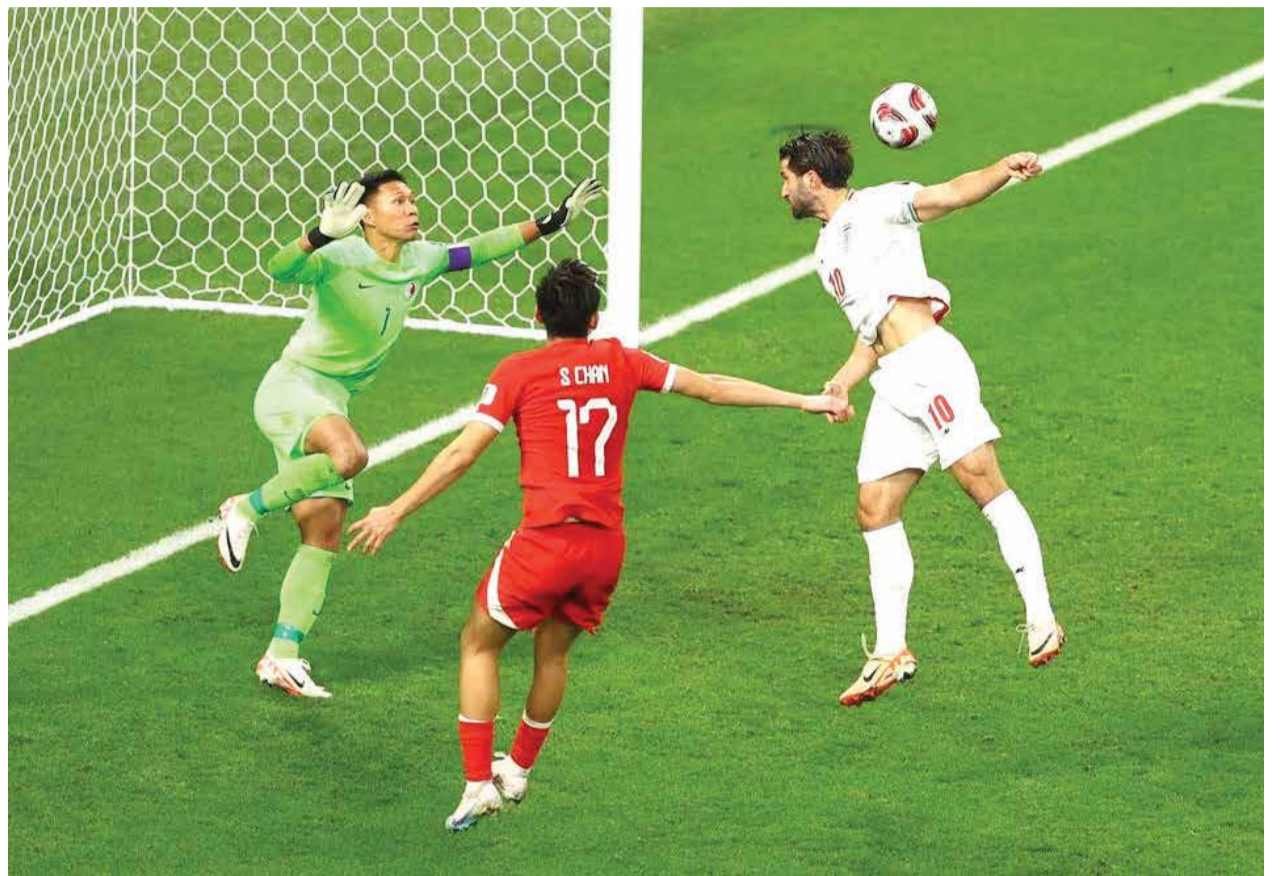
Mahdi Taremi, who had a quiet night at the Khalifa International Stadium before being substituted in the second half, adding: "The players were not mentally ready for the contest though I can't find an explanation for that."

Iranian fullback Ramin Rezaeian, meanwhile, rued "the missed opportunities in the early stages" which led to Hong Kong "finding the courage to push forward."

The Iranian backline gave the ball away cheaply on a couple of occasions and, in fact, the final outcome could have been different, had it not been for the East Asian side – the lowest ranked team in the tournament – lacking the killer touch. Despite the defeat, Hong Kong head coach Jorn Andersen was "proud" of his team's display, saying: "We played against one of the top teams in Asia, 21st in the FIFA rankings, but we did not see the difference between the teams."

"I spoke with the Iran coach before the match and I told him, for me Iran is alongside Japan and Korea Republic as top teams, but today I see my team as very strong. We created many chances, but we could not take our chances and score," added the Norwegian.

Qalenoee, however, had other ideas. "If you see the stats, you can see the difference in shots, possession and chances created. For sure, we still have some errors, but the players and the technical staff are all fighting hard and giving their best," said the Iranian.



Iranian striker Karim Ansarifard (10) goes up in vain for a header during a 1-0 victory over Hong Kong in the AFC Asian Cup at the Khalifa International Stadium, Al Rayyan, Qatar, on January 19, 2024.  
● MOLLY DARLINGTON/REUTERS

## Persepolis closing in on ex-Asian player of the year Hassan: Report

## Sports Desk

Persian Gulf Pro League champion is set to sign Qatari fullback Abdelkarim Hassan on a season-and-a-half long contract – for a reported fee of \$750,000 – according to the media in Iran.

An Asian Player of the Year in 2018, Hassan won four Qatari top-flight titles as well as the 2011 AFC Champions League crown with Al Saad before parting ways with the club in controversial manner to join Kuwaiti side Al Jahra in January last year.

Hassan, 30, has 11 goals and assists apiece in 101 appearances for the national team, the last of which came against the Netherlands at

the 2022 World Cup group stage. The left fullback played an integral role in helping Qatar lift a maiden AFC Asian Cup trophy in 2019 in the United Arab Emirates, where he was named in the team of the tournament.

Hassan was handed an indefinite suspension by the Qatar Football Association last January, while having his Al Saad contract terminated, following a social media altercation with a fan.

Hassan responded to a complaint on SnapChat about Qatar's World Cup group exit on home soil by posting: "Relax, do you think it's war?"

Hassan is to arrive in Tehran on Monday to sign the contract with Persepolis, which is desperately

looking for a new head coach after Yahya Golmohammadi stepped down from his role in the aftermath of 1-1 draw against Mes Rafsanjan in the league on the first of the new year.

Oman head coach Branko Ivanovic was approached to make a dramatic return to the Reds bench, once his Asian Cup campaign comes to an end in Qatar, but the Croatian, who won three league titles with Persepolis before leaving the club in 2019, on Thursday turned down the offer due to "personal and family" reasons.

Persepolis is third in the Iranian league tables with 30 points after 15 rounds of matches – two points adrift of archrival Esteghlal on top.



● MATTHIAS HANGST/GETTY IMAGES

## Iran beaten by Qatar, misses out on World Handball Championship berth

## Sports Desk

A second successive defeat in the main round of the Asian Men's Handball Championship saw Iran fail to progress to the last four in Bahrain and miss out on a place in next year's World Handball Championship. Having suffered a 25-23 loss to Japan in the Group I opener, Majid Rahimizadeh's men did a great job to bounce back from a 15-13 deficit at halftime against the Asian powerhouse and level the scoreline at 20-20, before the five-time defending champion restored the lead in the closing stages to win 27-23.

Cuban-born Frankis Marzo contributed a game-high nine goals for Qatar, followed by Ahmad Madadi, who finished on five. Mojtaba Heidarpour topped the scoring chart for Iran with seven goals, with Kiarash Taheri and Reza Ezzati chipping three apiece.

The result meant Qatar is joined by Japan, which defeated the United Arab Emirates 29-26 later on Friday, in the semifinals, and the top spot of the group will be at stake when the two sides square off in Isa Town's Sheikh Khalifa Sports City Hall today.

Iran, third in the table on goal difference, will face the UAE today with a win or draw sending Rahimizadeh's side into the fifth-place contest on Thursday. This is first major tournament for Iran under Rahimizadeh, who replaced Montenegrin Vesselin Vujović following a group exit in October's Asian qualifiers for the Paris Olympics.

Vujović steered Iran to the fourth place in the previous edition of the Asian Championship

in Saudi Arabia two years ago and a spot at the 2023 world event.



Qatar's Frankis Marzo (10) shoots during a victory over Iran in the Asian Men's Handball Championship in Isa Town, Bahrain, on January 19, 2024.  
● IRIHF