

## AFC Asian Cup:

## Iran has to be wary as underdog Syria looks to continue fairytale run

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Three-time champion Iran will be looking to continue its quest for a first AFC Asian Cup trophy in nearly five decades in the round of 16 of the continent's major international tournament today.

Standing between the Asian powerhouse and a showdown with Japan or Bahrain – which will square off earlier today – in the quarterfinals is Syria, which was inspired by a high-profile Argentinian head coach in Hector Cuper for a first-ever progress into the knockout phase of the tournament.

A trademark combination between Roma striker Sardar Azmoun and Porto frontman Mahdi Taremi saw the latter find the back of the net twice as Iran defeated the United Arab Emirates 2-1 for a clean sweep of group victories – a feat only achieved by Qatar and Iraq.

In securing a place among the four best third-placed teams across the six groups, Syria had Omar Khrubin to thank for a historic night as the veteran striker came off the bench to score his team's sole goal in three outings for a 1-0 victory over India last time out.

All the facts and figures as well as the history of the two sides' head-to-head make Iran the ultimate favorite to win today's encounter but the outcome of the tournament so far suggest anything but an easy test for Amir Qalenoey's men as football fans in the continent have been treated to some shock results in Qatar.

Japan's 2-1 loss to Iraq and South Korea's failure to finish atop the



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group, followed by surprise last-16 wins for Tajikistan and Jordan, mean Qalenoey will have to make sure his men will take nothing for granted when stepping onto the pitch in Doha's Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium.

While Iran's performance has been just decent amidst under-par displays by the pretournament favorites, the backline looked vulnerable every time the team was disposed of the ball in

its own half – even against minnow opponents in Palestine and Hong Kong – and a repeat of the incident could cost Qalenoey's side dearly against the prolific Khrubin – a former Asian Player of the Year who has fond memories of playing against Iranian goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand, bagging five goals in Al Hilal's 6-2 aggregate victory over Persepolis in the AFC Champions League semifinals seven years ago – not

to mention Iran will be without center-backs Hossein Kan'ani and Majid Hosseini through suspension and injury, as well as full-back Sadeq Moharrami, who will be out for months after suffering a torn ligament against the UAE. For all the lack of goals in the group phase, Cuper will be looking to build on his team's solid performance in the back – which saw Syria concede only once in a defeat by Australia while keeping

a clean sheet against Uzbekistan – when facing Azmoun and Taremi, probably the deadliest duo in the Asian football.

"I believe it is going to be one of our toughest games in the tournament as Syria has a top coach on the bench and enjoys a well-organized backline. Mr. Cuper has been a great coach in forming a solid defensive structure in his teams as he did with Valencia and Inter," Qalenoey said in Tuesday's

press conference, adding: "We have to take lessons from our mistakes in the previous games and stay focused throughout the contest."

Qalenoey said he has been trying to change the team's defensive approach and mindset – which was built under former coach Carlos Queiroz during his nine-year spell in charge – since he took the role less than a year ago. "Individual errors saw us concede two goals in the group stage, but we will still play an attack-minded football against Syria as we want our fans to enjoy watching their team," added Qalenoey.

"I've always told my players to showcase their individual skills on the pitch, specially in the final third, as dribbling and technical flair are the main features of the Iranian football."

Cuper might be best remembered by being an unfortunate runner-up when his Valencia team fell to defeats against European heavyweights Real Madrid and Bayern Munich in back-to-back UEFA Champions League finals in the early 2000s, but the Argentine knows an underdog victory today will go down as one of the biggest achievements in his 30-year managerial career.

If you have any doubt about what the fairytale run in Qatar means to war-ravaged Syrians – whose team includes players who have learned their trades overseas as a result of years of migration caused by the domestic conflict – just watch the viral footage of the beIN SPORTS reporter and Cuper's translator bursting into tears and hugging each other during an interview with the Argentinian coach after the historic victory over India.

## Esteghlal fullback Yamga out for rest of the season with eye injury

### Sports Desk

Esteghlal fullback Kevin Yamga's season has come to a premature ending after the Frenchman suffered an eye injury during a training session, the Persian Gulf Pro League club's head coach Javad Nekounam confirmed on Monday.

The career-threatening injury came after Yamga's collision with teammate Omid Hamedifar weeks ago before he underwent several surgeries on his left eye.

Yet to have his sight fully restored, the versatile right-back played his part in helping the Tehran Blues lead the Iranian top-flight table before the Asian Cup pause, bagging four goals in 15 appearances – including a last-gasp equalizer from the spot against Persepolis in the Tehran Derby.

Esteghlal is one point clear of Sepahan on top the league table, with Persepolis in third, two points adrift of its city rival.

Yamga's injury comes as a massive blow for Nekounam, who is frustrated by his team's lack of activity in the midseason transfer window.



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The club's only signing has seen Brazilian center-back rejoin after parting ways with the Blues at the end of the previous campaign, while Esteghlal is reportedly in advanced talks with Golgozar Sirjan to sign Mahdi Tikdari as a replacement for Yamga.

Meanwhile, Saeid Mehri, who terminated his contract with Esteghlal two weeks ago, was unveiled as a new midfielder at the Cypriot First Division leader APOEL Nicosia, where he will reunite with the Blues' former Portuguese head coach Ricardo Sá Pinto.

## Kremlin condemns doping ban on Olympic figure skater

REUTERS – The Kremlin on Tuesday condemned a doping ban on teenage figure skater Kamila Valieva and the stripping of an Olympic gold medal from her and her team mates, saying Russia would try to contest the decisions.

The Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) on Monday banned Valieva for four years for doping, a decision that also took away the Russian Olympic Committee's gold medal in the team event at the 2022 Beijing Winter Games.

"We do not agree with these decisions – neither with the decision of the court, nor with the decision of the (ice skating) federation. We don't accept them," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said. "If there are any opportunities to challenge and continue to defend the rights of our athletes, they must be mobilised to the end."

Valieva tested positive for the banned substance trimetazidine, which prevents angina, at the Russian national championships in December 2021. The result was made known only after she competed in the team event in Beijing. Her team has said the positive test could have been due to a mix-up with her grandfather's heart medication.



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But the CAS panel determined there had been no scope for Valieva, who was 15 at the time of the offence, to be treated with more leniency than an adult found to have committed an anti-doping rule violation. The doping charge against the young athlete stirred strong emotions in Russia at the time. Russia, and before it the Soviet

Union, have long regarded the Olympics as a chance to showcase the country as a winner on the global stage. But doping controversies in the past decade have soured Moscow's relations with the International Olympic Committee and forced its athletes to compete at successive Games without their national flag or anthem.