

## World Cup Asian qualifiers:

## Iran names provisional 21-man squad for double header



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## Sports Desk

Iran head coach Amir Qalenoee announced a provisional 21-man squad for the two fixtures at the World Cup Asian qualifiers.

More players will be added to the list after today's games in the Persian Gulf Pro League, when Tractor plays Golgozar Sirjan in Tabriz and Esteghlal visits Zob Ahan.

Team Melli will face the United Arab Emirates at Tehran's Azadi Stadium on Thursday – the first day of the new Persian year – before hosting Uzbekistan on March 25.

Iran is top of the Group A table with 16 points – three clear of Uzbekistan and six above the UAE – with four games remaining, and with the top two winning direct qualification, Qalenoee's men could book their tickets for the 2026 finals in North America by the end of the upcoming international break.

Persepolis striker Ali Alipour has received a first international callup by Qalenoee after bagging 10 top-flight goals, including three in the last four outings, to sit atop the league's leading marksmen's chart.

Iralco's 20-year-old goalkeeper Mohammad Khalifeh, and Malavan center-back Danial Eiri, 21, are the surprise names in Qalenoee's list.

Despite a run of five wins in six matches – including a 4-1 rout of

Asian Cup champion Qatar – Team Melli and Qalenoee have been facing scrutiny from the Iranian fans and pundits due to a series of unconvincing and inconsistent performances throughout the campaign.

The criticism peaked in November, when Iran dominated the first half of the away games against North Korea and the Kyrgyz Republic but still had to survive a late fightback by the minnow oppositions to walk away with hard-fought 3-2 victories.

The following is Iran's 21-man squad for the games the UAE and Uzbekistan:

**Goalkeepers:** Payam Niazmand (Sepahan), Mohammad Khalifeh (Iralco)

**Defenders:** Milad Mohammadi (Persepolis), Omid Nourafkan (Malavan), Ali Ne'mati (Foolad Khuzestan), Danial Eiri (Malavan), Mohammadhossein Kan'anizadegan (Persepolis), Amin Hazbavi (Sepahan), Arya Yousefi (Sepahan)

**Midfielders:** Saeed Ezzatollahi (Shabab Al Ahli), Mohammad Qorbani (Al Wahda), Mohammad Karimi (Sepahan), Saman Qoddous (Ittihad Kalba), Mohammad-Javad Hosseini (Dinamo Makhachkala), Mohammad Mohebbi (FC Rostov), Mahdi Qayedi (Ittihad Kalba), Ali Qolizadeh (Lech Poznan), Alireza Jahanbakhsh (SC Heerenveen)

**Strikers:** Mahdi Taremi (Internazionale), Ali Alipour (Persepolis), Sardar Azmoun (Shabab Al Ahli).

## Persian Gulf Pro League:

## Alipour, Dursun on target to send Persepolis top

## Sports Desk

Ali Alipour and Serdar Dursun scored in each half as Persepolis defeated Malavan 2-0 at the Persian Gulf Pro League in Tehran's Azadi Stadium on Friday.

The victory saw the Capital Reds, who are chasing an eighth top-flight crown in nine seasons, move atop the league table with 47 points – one point clear of Sepahan – though Tractor, which is third on 45 points with two games in hand, could overtake Persepolis with a home win against Golgozar Sirjan today. Sepahan was dealt a massive blow in its bid for a first league title in a decade after being held to a 1-1 stalemate at relegation-threatened Nassaji Mazandaran on Thursday – a fifth draw in six league outings for the Isfa-

han-based club.

Fresh from back-to-back league victories over city rival Esteghlal and Chadormalou, Persepolis started right on the front at the Azadi Stadium, taking a 16th-minute lead through Alipour, who headed home at the near post from a Soroush Rafiei's corner kick.

A third strike in four games saw Alipour sit atop the league's leading marksmen's chart with 10 goals and earn an international call-up for the upcoming double header against the UAE and Uzbekistan at the World Cup Asian qualifiers.

The visiting side delivered a much-improved and braver performance after the break, but Persepolis still managed to double the advantage midway through the second half, when

Dursun tapped in from close range, finishing off a sublime team move down the left flank – a third goal in five league appearances for the Turkish winter signing.

The defeat ended Malavan's three-game winning streak in the league, leaving the visitors sixth in the table with 30 points.

Meanwhile, Foolad Khuzestan defeated Iralco 2-0 in Ahvaz, courtesy of first-half goals from Sina Moridi and Mohammadreza Soleimani.

Foolad, which had its home game against Tractor postponed last week, is fourth in the table with 41 points, while Iralco is seventh with 28 points.

In the battle of two bottom-half strugglers, Mes Rafsanjan shared the spoils with Esteghlal Khuzestan in a goalless draw at home.

The result was still enough for Mes (23 points) to move three points clear of the relegation zone, with Es. Khuzestan in the 12th place with 25 points.

Elsewhere in the league today, Esteghlal will visit Zob Ahan at the Fooladshahr Stadium.

The Iranian top-flight sides will head into the Persian New Year break, before resuming action on March 29.



Persepolis strikers Ali Alipour (R) and Serdar Dursun celebrate a goal during a 2-0 victory over Malavan in the Persian Gulf Pro League at the Azadi Stadium, Tehran, Iran, on March 14, 2025.

MOJTABA SALEH/MIZAN



## Karate 1 Premier League:

## Iranians to vie for three medals on Day 3 in Hangzhou

## Sports Desk

Three medals, including one gold, will be up for grabs for the Iranians when they resume action on Day 3 of the Karate 1 Premier League series in Hangzhou, China, today.

Representing the country in the female kumite -55kg contests, Fatemeh Sa'adati defeated opponents from Scotland, Chile, and Greece to progress to the quarterfinals as the pool winner, before beating Bulgarian Ivet Goranova 2-0 for a last-four spot on Friday.

A 5-2 victory over Luxembourg's Jennifer Warling saw the Iranian girl set a final date with Rina Kodo of Japan.

Fatemeh Sadeqi, a Series A goal medalist in Tbilisi in January, will be looking to finish her campaign with a consolation bronze in the female kata event, when taking on Japanese Saeko Azuma. Sadeqi claimed three wins in a row in the pool phase but fell to a 43.3-41.6 loss to Mo Sheung Grace Lau of Hong Kong.

Former world champion Bahman

Asgari also enjoyed an emphatic run to reach the men's kumite -75kg semifinals, only to suffer a last-gasp defeat against Enzo Berthon of France, and will face Croatian Ivan Martinac in the bronze-medal bout today.



Iranian girl Fatemeh Sa'adati (R) will face Rina Kodo of Japan in the female kumite -55kg final at the Karate 1 Premier League series in Hangzhou, China, today.

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