

# What next for Iranian women's futsal after drab Asian Cup run?



## Sports Desk

A new head coach looks inevitable and imminent for the Iranian national team following a below-par campaign at the newly-finished AFC Women's Futsal Asian Cup in Hohhot, China.

The Iranian girls still had something to cheer about on the final day of the competition as a 3-1 victory over the host in the third-place playoff saw the country join Japan and Thailand in securing a spot at the inaugural Women's World Cup in the Philippines later in the year.

However, uninspiring performances and a first defeat in three editions for the two-time champion – a last-four setback against Japan – has convinced the national governing body of the sport to part ways with head coach Forouzan Soleimani ahead of the world showpiece in six-months' time, according to several reports in recent days.

News website Football 360 reported this week that Solei-

mani had been informed of the federation's decision immediately after the third-place victory, adding she refused to join the celebrations and was in tears while saying goodbye to her players in the locker room.

According to the report, the Iranian federation has already reached agreement with former coach Shahrzad Mozaffar for the job.

Mozaffar, who worked as an AFC analyst at the competition in Hohhot, was in charge of the bench when Iran won a second Asian title in 2018 and is expected to return to the role for a second spell.

The writing was always on the wall for Soleimani's team after a poor preparation for the tournament was followed by a shaky start in China. Iran edged out the Philippines 1-0 in their opener, and then beat Hong Kong 3-1 to secure a knockout spot, before its 12-game winning run in the Asian Cup history came to an end against Vietnam in contro-

versial, humiliating fashion. Soleimani's girls deliberately played for a goalless draw in their final group game, tanking the match to avoid Japan until the final, though the cynical approach backfired eventually as Japan's shock defeat to Thailand later on the final day of the group fixtures forced the two powerhouses into the same half of the knockout bracket.

"Our team was carried away by past successes going into the tournament, while our opponents came fully prepared with solid strategies, and reaped the rewards in the end," former Iran coach Shanaz Yari told ISNA.

"This team went seven years without any real program due to COVID pandemic and other issues. Now we all need to come together to make sure the team will have a decent campaign at the World Cup. Just being there isn't enough. We have to work hard to be among the top teams, which won't be easy, but these players have the potential to succeed."

## Iran international keeper Niazmand signs for Persepolis

### Sports Desk

Weeks of speculation over Payam Niazmand's future came to an end as the Iranian international goalkeeper joined Persepolis as a free agent from Sepahan on Monday, the Tehran Reds announced.

Niazmand, 30, who signed a two-year contract with the Reds, spent six seasons over two spells at Sepahan and registered 89 clean sheets in 201 appearances, helping the club lift the Hazfi Cup trophy last year.

Having made his Persian Gulf Pro League debut with Paykan in 2016, Niazmand joined Portimonense for the start of the 2023/24 season but returned to Sepahan a year later after making only five appearances in all competitions for the Portuguese top-flight side.

Capped on seven occasions for the national team, Niazmand is expected to be part of the Iranian squad at the World Cup finals in North America next year.

Niazmand's arrival could spell the end of Alexis Guendouz's time in Persepolis. The Algerian keeper joined the club last summer and had 15 clean sheets in 37 games with the Reds but his lack of contribution to the buildup play prompted Turkish head coach Ismail Kartal to seek a new number one.

Niazmand is the Reds' fifth signing in as many days since the conclusion of the league season, which promises a summer of shakeup in the squad under Kartal, after his team finished the campaign without a trophy. Persepolis failed to reach the knockout phase of the AFC Champions League Elite and

was beaten by Sepahan in the Hazfi Cup last 16, while finishing third in the league table with 60 points – eight adrift of champion Tractor. This was a worst league position in 10 seasons for the Reds, who dominated the Iranian club football for nearly a decade with seven top-flight titles – including domestic doubles on two occasions – while reaching the final showpiece of the Asian elite clubs' competition twice.

Persepolis has already secured the services of Congolese winger Thiery Bifouma and Amin Kazemian from Esteghlal Khuzestan and Iralco, respectively, while Mojtaba Fakhrian joined as a young frontline prospect from Shams Azar, and attacking midfielder Reza Shekari left Sepahan as a free agent to sign for the Reds.



Iranian goalkeeper Payam Niazmand (R) poses with the Persepolis shirt after signing a two-year contract with the Persian Gulf Pro League club in Tehran, Iran, on May 19, 2025.

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## Ten Hag a candidate to return in charge of Ajax

**REUTERS** – Former Manchester United manager Erik ten Hag could be headed back to Ajax Amsterdam next season, the club's technical director said.

Ten Hag has been without a job since his firing in October, but Alex Kroes told Dutch television NOS that Ten Hag is a candidate to replace Francesco Farioli, who quit Ajax on Monday.

"Erik ten Hag has been on the list for a long time," Kroes said. "He is well-known, he did a fantastic job when he was here."

"I spoke to him briefly on Sunday. He was in the Arena as a spectator," he added.

Ten Hag attended Ajax's last game of the Dutch league season against FC Twente on Sunday. They won 2-0 but still fell short of taking the title, opens new tab from PSV Eindhoven.

The 55-year-old Ten Hag coached at Ajax from 2018 to 2022, winning three league titles and taking the club to Champions League semi-final in 2019 when they came all the way through the preliminary stages.

Farioli resigned on Monday but had already decided to leave after a dramatic draw in their penultimate game against Groningen last Wednesday when Ajax let slip

a 2-1 lead nine minutes into stoppage time to effectively cede top place in the standings to PSV.

"Francesco texted me from the bus that evening: 'let's sit down together tomorrow'," Kroes said. "Then he said that he had serious doubts about whether he should continue." Farioli said the Ajax board and he differed on how to proceed next year after Ajax squandered a nine-point lead with five matches left in the campaign.

"My decision has nothing to do with the title fight," insisted the 36-year-old Italian. "But I feel that this is the best choice, especially for the club."