

## AFC Women's Asia Cup qualifiers:

# 'Beyond expectations': Jafari hails Iran's resolve in sensational progress

## Sports Desk

Head coach Marziyeh Jafari was full of praise for her players after Iran defeated Jordan 2-1 in the final game in Group A of the AFC Women's Asia Cup qualifiers to advance to next March's finals in Australia.

Knowing that anything but a victory would have ended their bid for qualification, the Iranian girls rose to the occasion on Saturday, recovering from a shock defeat against Lebanon to beat the in-form host in Amman and leapfrog Jordan on top of the group table on the head-to-head criteria.

Chances were few and far in the first half at the King Abdullah II Stadium, with both sides being denied by the woodwork once, before Sara Didar gave Iran the lead two minutes into the second half.

A tame headed clearance by Jordan was redirected into the box by Afsaneh Chatre-noor, with Negin Zandi nodding the ball down for Didar to slot the ball past goalkeeper Sherin Al Shalabe. On a perfect record prior to the game, Jordan desperately pushed for an equalizer but was punished on the counter with nine minutes



Iran's Sara Didar (20) celebrates with teammates after scoring in a 2-1 win against Jordan at the AFC Women's Asia Cup qualifiers in Amman, Jordan, on July 19, 2025.

● AFC

left on the clock, when Zandi surged from the halfway line before doubling Iran's lead with a composed finish.

It still turned out to be nail-biting closing stages

for the Iranian girls, after Fatemeh Ameneh's header lobbed Iranian goalkeeper Raha Yazdani to find the back of her own net in the 88th minute.

Yazdani produced a heroic

save a minute later to deny Jordanian skipper Maysa Jbarah from the edge of the six-yard box, as Iran held on to become the final team to punch the ticket for the 12-team finals.

"I am really happy that we were able to make the hearts of the Iranian people happy. Qualifying for the AFC Asian Cup was not easy," Jafari said after the game.

"We entered the compe-

tition with difficult conditions, intensive camps, logistical restrictions and a lot of psychological pressure, but my players fought with all their might and performed beyond expect-

tations," added the Iranian, who was only appointed to the job in April.

"The players not only showed high technical quality, but also showed that they are mentally strong and motivated at the level of a great team. This team deserves to be seen."

Despite a sensational qualification, Jafari still believes much more work needs to be done to ensure Iran will improve on the 2022 group exit when making a second appearance at the flagship continental event.

"This qualification is not the end of the road; it is the beginning of a new chapter. We must have a more detailed plan to have a strong presence in the final stage.

"This team has the capacity to be seen, grow, and compete with Asian powers. I hope the support continues so that we can be a worthy representative of Iranian women's football in Asia."

Iran will be joined by host Australia and defending champion China, as well as Japan, South Korea, India, Bangladesh, Chinese Taipei, Vietnam, Uzbekistan, the Philippines and three-time champion North Korea in the 21st edition of the Women's Asia Cup.



Iranian outside-hitter Morteza Sharifi (16) goes up for a spike against France at the Volleyball Nations League in Gdansk, Poland, on July 19, 2025.

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## Volleyball Nations League:

## Iran undone by Olympic champion, misses out on Finals spot

## Sports Desk

Iran's bid for a first progress to the Volleyball Nations League Finals since 2022 came to an end after a straight-set defeat (26-24, 25-16, 26-24) against back-to-back Olympic gold medalist France in their penultimate preliminary game in Gdansk, Poland, on Saturday.

The result saw the defending champion secure a top-seven finish in the 18-team table and a place in the quarterfinals – starting July 30 in Ningbo, China.

French Opposite Théo Faure scored 20 points for the third time in as many matches in the third week of action, with outside-hitter Trévor Clévenot

chipping in 14, including two blocks, and two aces. Yacine Louati also finished in double figures for the European powerhouse, contributing 11 points.

Morteza Sharifi led the Iranian offense with 16 points, while fellow outside-hitter Amirhossein Esfandiari tallied 11, with nine kills and two blocks. "The result is part of the game but not the most important thing for us now," Italian head coach Roberto Piazza, who was appointed to the Iranian job in January, said after the game, adding: "We have to grow up every day."

"What I liked about today was that we played a normal game against the two-time Olympic champion. The [Iranian] players showed that they have

the confidence to play in top level of volleyball," added the Italian.

The decisive point of the contest perhaps came in the closing stages of the first set, when Iran, leading by 24-22, conceded four points in succession to lose the set.

"I think we gave it our all on the court once again, especially in the first and third sets," Piazza said.

"In the second set, we lost some confidence because when you're leading in a set but then let it slip away for whatever reason, the mental setback can stick with you for a while. But what I keep telling my players is that every new set is a new life. The previous set has to be forgotten quickly because each one is a fresh challenge."

## Asian Men's U16 Volleyball Championship:

## Iran beaten by Pakistan in five-set final

## Sports Desk

Iran relinquished a two-set lead to suffer a 3-2 (22-25, 21-25, 30-28, 25-21, 15-11) loss to Pakistan in final showpiece of the Asian Men's U16 Volleyball Championship in Nakhon Pathom, Thailand.

Muhammad Junaid chipped in a game-high 28 points for Pakistan, with Faizan Ullah finishing on 22. Azhvan Namazi, meanwhile, contributed 22 points for Iran, while three teammates – Amirreza Faramarzi (13), Yasin Asadizadeh (13), and Radan Salehi (11) – also finished in double figures.

This was Iran's second defeat against Pakistan in the tournament, following a 3-1 setback in the second group phase.

There was, however, some consolation for the Iranian players in the awarding ceremony as outside-hitter Namazi, middle-blocker Maziyar Fallah, and setter Aidin Pouzesh picked up individual awards and were named in the team of the tournament.

While questioning the real age of some Pakistani players, Iran head coach Arash Sadeqiani was still full of praise for his boys, who "had been away from their families for

50 days, and only arrived in Thailand 15 hours before their opening game."

"There were other challenges like jet lag and tough weather conditions, but the team deserves credit for pushing through all of them," added Sadeqiani, who vowed a much-improved performance by his team at next year's FIVB U17 World Championship in Doha, Qatar.

Iran and Pakistan will be joined by the other two semifinalists India and Japan in representing the continent in the world showpiece.



Iranian players are pictured on the podium with their silver medals at the Asian Men's U16 Volleyball Championship in Nakhon Pathom, Thailand, on July 19, 2025.

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