

# Iran close to reclaiming 2+1 ACL Elite quota after strong Asian run

## Sports Desk

Iranian top-flight football is close to reclaiming the coveted 2+1 quota for the AFC Champions League Elite 2027/28 season, following an encouraging run by Persian Gulf Pro League trio Tractor, Sepahan, and Esteghlal across the two ongoing Asian competitions.

A disappointing campaign by Iranian clubs last season saw the country's allocation reduced to one direct berth and one playoff spot (1+1) for both the current season and the 2026/27 edition of the tournament.

Tractor's 2-1 home victory over Qatar's Al Duhail last week lifted the Tabriz-based side to second place in the 12-team West Zone standings with 14 points – four behind leaders Al Hilal – and secured qualification for the round of 16 of Asia's top-tier club competition with two matches to spare in the league phase.

Sepahan and Esteghlal, meanwhile, advanced to the knockout stage of the AFC Champions League Two after finishing runners-up in their respective groups.

Goals from Esmail Qolizadeh, Duckens Nazon and Jasir Asani sealed a comprehensive 3-0 away victory for Esteghlal over Bahrain's Al Muharraq in a must-win clash on Wednesday. The result allowed the Tehran Blues to overtake their hosts and claim second place behind the UAE's Al Wasl in Group A.



Tractor's Mahdi Torabi (L) is seen in action during a 2-1 victory over Al Duhail in the AFC Champions League at the Yadegar-e Imam Stadium, Tabriz, Iran, on December 22, 2025. **MOJTAB SALEH/AFC**

Sepahan had already confirmed second place behind Al Hussein in Group C with a 2-0 home win over the Jordanian side in November. That group featured only three teams after Indian champion Mohun Bagan SG was expelled from the competition for refusing to travel to Isfahan, citing concerns over "the safety and well-being of its

players, officials and support staff." Iran currently sits third in the latest AFC Club Competitions Ranking for the West Region, released on Thursday by Footy Rankings, with 67.412 points. Saudi Arabia lead the table with 116.945 points, followed by the United Arab Emirates on 73.003. Tractor have made the biggest

contribution to Iran's surge, producing an outstanding campaign with four wins and two draws to collect 17 points. Sepahan have added 9.862 points through two wins, one draw and one defeat in the Asian second-tier competition, while Esteghlal have contributed 7.333 points from two wins, two draws and two losses.

With Saudi Arabia and the UAE having pulled clear of the chasing pack, Iran's primary quota battle is now with Qatar, who sits fourth in the standings with 62.418 points.

Although this margin provides Iranian club football with a degree of breathing room, the race is far from settled. In this context, any

elimination or setback for Qatari sides in Asia would be highly beneficial for Iran.

Qatar's Al Gharafa and Al Sadd are currently ninth and 10th, respectively, in the Elite League's West Zone table and, as things stand, are set to miss out on a top-eight finish and a place in the knockout rounds.

Both sides are due to face Tractor and Saudi champions Al Ittihad in the remaining rounds, and a victory—or even a draw—for Dragan Skocic's men would not only boost Iran's points tally but also directly dent a key rival's chances. Iran also holds an advantage in the second-tier competition, where Qatar will be represented only by Al Ahli SC in the round of 16 – a potential opponent for either Sepahan or Esteghlal in today's knockout draw.

While crucial fixtures remain in both the group and knockout stages of the two tournaments, the current trajectory suggests that after two seasons of reduced representation, Iranian football is closer than ever to rejoining the group of nations awarded two direct berths plus one playoff spot in the AFC Champions League Elite.

The continued progress of Iran's three top-flight representatives, combined with any potential slips by Qatari clubs, could make the upcoming Asian campaign a defining moment – one that not only restores a lost quota, but also reaffirms Iran's status as one of West Asia's leading football powers.



ITF

## Safi finishes runner-up in doubles at ITF World Tour event

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Iran's Meshkatolzahra Safi settled for a runner-up finish in the doubles event at the ITF Women's World Tour W15 tournament in Antalya, Türkiye.

The 21-year-old teamed up with China's Jiayu Xu to reach the final, where they narrowly lost a three-set battle, 6-4, 3-6, 13-11, to Romanian Maria Sara Popa and Morocco's Diaa El Jaridi in Sunday's showdown

at the \$15,000 clay-court event.

Safi and Xu began their campaign with a straight-sets victory, 6-3, 6-2, over the Turkish duo of Deniz Cakil and Serife Pelin Sari, before defeating Alisa Vasileva and Diana Yakovleva 2-0 (6-3, 6-3) to advance to the semifinals. The second-seeded pair then secured their place in the final with a composed 2-0 (6-4, 6-4) win over Romania's Alexandra Irina Anghel and Türkiye's Duru Soke.

## Iran to face Bahrain in pre-Asian Handball Championship friendlies

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Iran will play two friendly matches against Bahrain in Manama today and on Thursday as both teams prepare for the upcoming Asian Men's Handball Championship, which begins in Kuwait on January 15.

At the 22nd edition of the continental championship, Iran has been drawn in Group D alongside two-time champion Japan – runner-up to Qatar in 2024 – four-time bronze medalist Saudi Arabia, and Australia.

Iran opens its campaign

against Saudi Arabia on the first day of competition, followed by a match against Australia two days later. The group stage concludes on January 19 with a clash against Japan – a rematch of their main-round encounter in the previous edition, which Japan narrowly won 25-23.

The top two teams from each of the four groups will advance to the main round, where they will be divided into two groups of four.

Led by Spanish head coach Rafael Guijosa Castillo, Iran will be aiming to rebound



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from a disappointing campaign at November's Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh, where losses to Qatar (39-23) and the UAE (28-25) – either side of a 57-14 victory over the Maldives – left Iran third in its group and out of semifinal

contention. As if added motivation were needed, World Championship berths will be up for grabs in Kuwait, with the four semi-finalists securing qualification for the 2027 showpiece in Germany.

## Iranian Volleyball Super League wrap-up: Foolad breaks Tabi'at curse in five-set thriller to stay top



Foolad Sirjan outside hitter Esmail Mosafer (7) celebrates a point during a 3-2 victory over Tabi'at Eslamshahr in the Iranian Volleyball Super League at the Gohar Ravesh Hall, Sirjan, Iran, on December 28, 2025. **volleyball.ir**

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Defending champion Foolad Sirjan ended a four-match losing streak against Tabi'at Eslamshahr with a hard-fought five-set victory on Sunday, maintaining its perfect record atop the Iranian Volleyball Super League.

Behrouz Ataei's side rallied from behind to win 3-2 (25-15, 21-25, 20-25, 25-16, 15-11) in front of a home crowd, securing its ninth straight win and sole possession of first place. Tabi'at, meanwhile, sits ninth in the standings with three wins.

Foolad's next test is another home match on Wednesday against fifth-place San'atgaran Omid, which overturned an early deficit to defeat Paykan 3-1 (22-25, 25-21, 25-18, 26-14).

Elsewhere, Shahdab Yazd also staged a comeback to beat Shahr-dari Urmia in four sets (22-25, 27-25, 25-17, 25-23), solidifying its hold on second place with 25 points from eight victories. Sepahan claimed a 3-1 win (26-24, 24-26, 25-15, 25-19) over Mehregan Nour to remain third with 21 points, two ahead of fourth-place Chadormalou. Chadorma-

lou celebrated its seventh win in nine matches with a dramatic 3-2 victory (25-21, 20-25, 23-25, 25-18, 16-14) over Saipa in Tehran.

The loss marked Saipa's seventh defeat of the season, leaving them third from bottom with six points.

In other matches, Pas Gorgan swept Razim Polymer 3-0 (25-19, 25-17, 25-22) at home, while Mes Rafsanjan defeated bottom-side Esteghlal Gonbad 3-1 (25-14, 25-23, 21-25, 25-16). The two clubs are now level on two wins and five points, with Rafsanjan holding the edge on the table.