

Underdog Iran looking to beat the odds at U23 Asian Cup



By Amirhadi Arsalanpour
Staff writer

Iran will be looking to benefit from its underdog tag when it gets its campaign underway against South Korea at the AFC U23 Asian Cup today.

For all the talent within the squad over the years, the Iranian under-23 side, which missed out on a place at the 2024 finals in Qatar, has failed to match the national senior team's continental stature at the tournament since it was first introduced in 2013. Iran has managed four victories in 13 matches across four appearances in the finals, progressing beyond the group stage only once – at the 2016 edition, where Iran finished runner-up to host Qatar in the group before suffering a 3-0 loss to Japan in the quarterfinals.

Still, Iran head coach Omidreza Ravankhah will hope to see his team build on an impressive qualification campaign last September, when the under-23 Team Melli claimed comfortable wins against Hong Kong (4-0) and Guam (6-0) before defeating the UAE 3-2 for a clean sweep of victories in Group I.

Paykan striker Kasra Taheri was the joint top scorer of the qualifiers with five goals, but is ruled out of the finals after suffering an injury while on duty with the Iranian senior team in October.



Iranian players and coaching staff celebrate after a 3-2 victory over the UAE at the AFC U23 Asian Cup qualifiers in Abu Dhabi, UAE, on September 9, 2025.

Ravankhah, however, will not lack quality in his 23-man squad. Arguably the brightest prospect in Iranian football in recent years, midfielder Mohammad-Javad Hosseinejad has registered two goals and one assist in 18 appearances for Dynamo Makhachkala in the Russian Premier Liga this season, and will hope his performance in Saudi Arabia is rewarded with a place in the se-

nior roster for the World Cup in the summer. Reza Ghandipour, meanwhile, will spearhead the Iranian front-line, having scored four goals in 12 games for Emirati top-flight side Al Wahda, while Mohammad Asgari can provide further threat in the final third after a return of seven goals in 16 matches for Sepahan. Iralco goalkeeper Mohammad

Khalifeh, Esteghlal midfielder Amir-mohammad Razaqinia, Shams Azar fullback Farzin Mo'amelegari, and Akhmat Grozny center-back Mohammad-Mahdi Zare' will also be among the Iranian players to watch in Saudi Arabia. Ravankhah and his side will face a significantly tougher challenge in Group C compared to the qualifiers.

South Korea has reached the

semifinals on four occasions, lifting the trophy in 2020, while much of their current squad was involved in the last-four run at the 2023 FIFA U20 World Cup. Iran and South Korea met in the group stage in 2020, with the East Asian side winning 2-1. Uzbekistan – champions in 2018 – will again be among the favorites to win the title, having fallen short in back-to-back finals

against Saudi Arabia and Japan in the previous two editions.

Iran will take on Uzbekistan on Saturday – a second meeting between the two sides in the competition following their 1-1 draw in 2020.

Lebanon, whom Iran will play in its final group game next Tuesday, will make its debut in the finals, looking to build on a respectable qualifying campaign that saw the Middle Eastern minnows advance as one of the four best runners-up. The following is Iran's full squad for the AFC U23 Asian Cup:

Goalkeepers: Mohammad Khalifeh (Iralco), Amir-Mahdi Maqsoodi (Sepahan), Pouria Rafiei (Sepahan)
Defenders: Mohammad-Mahdi Zare' (Akhmat Grozny), Danial Eiri (Malavan FC), Farzin Mo'amelegari (Shams Azar), Masoud Mohebbi (Khaybar FC), Bahram Goudarzi (Iralco), Arshia Vosouqifard (Fajr Sepasi), Seyyed Mahdi Mahdavi (Iralco), Erfan Jamshidi (Paykan)

Midfielders: Pouria Latififar (Golgothar Sirjan), Mahdi Goudarzi (Khaybar FC), Abbas Habibi (Malavan FC), Mahdi Ja'fari (Malavan FC), Amir-mohammad Razaqinia (Esteghlal), Amir-Reza Shekhirad (Nassaji Mazandaran), Mohammad-Javad Hosseinejad (Dynamo Makhachkala)
Strikers: Yadegar Rostami (Fajr Sepasi), Mohammad-Hossein Sadeqi (Persepolis), Hamidreza Zarouni (Khaybar FC), Mohammad Asgari (Sepahan), Reza Ghandipour (Al Wahda).

Iranian Greco-Roman wrestlers to compete at Vehbi Emre tournament



● IAWFIR

Sports Desk

Iranian wrestlers will vie for glory across 10 Greco-Roman weight classes and, more importantly, a place on the national team for major tournaments in 2026, as the Yaşar Doğu, Vehbi Emre & Hamit Kaplan International Tournament kicks off in Antalya, Türkiye.

The tournament serves as the second phase of Iran's selection process – following last month's National Championships – for April's Asian Championships, as well as the World Championships and Asian Games in September.

Iran head coach Hassan

Rangraz has named a 13-man squad for the event, with Kianoush Shamshiri and Mahdi Kamali competing in the 55kg weight class. Mohammad Ashiri, runner-up at the National Championships, will represent Iran in the 60kg category, while Reza Bahmani and Ali Hajivand will contest the 63kg division.

Mohammad Eskandari will compete in the 67kg class, and Omid Bahmani will be joined by Kia Rostami in the 72kg category. Aliasghar Samdaliri (77kg), Mohammad Arjmand (82kg), Mohammad-Hossein Ostad-Me'mar (87kg), Amirreza Moradian (97kg), and Arman

Tahmasbi (130kg) complete the Iranian roster in Antalya. The two-day Greco-Roman competition will be followed by the freestyle event, with 11 Iranian wrestlers competing across eight weight classes.

Reza Mo'meni, who claimed the national title in late December, will be joined by world U20 silver medalist Ahoura Khateri in the 61kg weight class. Mor-teza Hajmollamohammadi will compete in the 65kg division despite suffering a final defeat to Peyman Ne'mati at the National Championships in Tabriz. Ali Rezaei – a gold medalist at the 2024 U20 World

Championships – will feature in the 74kg category alongside Ali Karampour, who won a world junior bronze medal two years ago in Pontevedra, Spain. Erfan Alizadeh, a silver medalist at last year's Ranking Series event in Tirana, Albania, and former world U20 champion Abolfazl Babalou will represent Iran in the 97kg division. Abolfazl Mohammadnejad will compete at 125kg as he looks to build on his world U23 gold medal from October. Amir Parasteh (57kg), Mohammadhossein Norouzi (86kg), and Javad Fat'hkhani (92kg) are the other Iranians in the freestyle event.

Iran's Ahmadabbasi wary of 'unique challenge' at Futsal Asian Cup

Sports Desk

Saeid Ahmadabbasi says the upcoming AFC Futsal Asian Cup in Jakarta, Indonesia, will not be an easy ride for Iran, with the veteran pivot noting that every edition brings "its own challenges, pressures and motivations."

Iran opens its bid for a record-extending 14th title against Malaysia in Group D on Jan. 28. Vahid Shamsaei's team faces Saudi Arabia on Jan. 30 before closing the group stage against Afghanistan two days later at the Jakarta International Velodrome. The top two teams from each group advance to the quarterfinals.

Iran has long dominated Asia's premier futsal tournament,

losing just four of 105 matches across 17 editions. Two of those defeats came in finals against Japan, the only other nation to lift the title.

Fresh off a gold medal at the Islamic Solidarity Games in November, capped by a 5-0 win over Morocco in the final, Iran again enters as the favorite to lift the trophy at the Indonesia Arena on Feb. 7.

Still, with futsal developing rapidly across the continent, Shamsaei's side is likely to face stiff tests from emerging teams.

Afghanistan is among the teams to watch after an impressive 2024 debut, finishing fifth under Iranian coach Majid Mortezaei to secure a first World Cup berth later that year in Uzbekistan. Iran and Afghanistan will meet

at a major tournament for the third time in less than two years. Iran won 3-1 at the 2024 Asian Cup but drew 2-2 at the Islamic Solidarity Games.

Saudi Arabia exited in the group stage of the previous edition but showed progress at the Islamic Solidarity Games at home, pushing African champion Morocco in the semifinals before losing 6-3 after extra time.

"This tournament never becomes repetitive. Every edition has its own challenges, pressures and motivations. Going back onto the court to fight for this trophy again is exciting for all of us," Ahmadabbasi, who made a massive contribution to Iran's title-winning campaign in 2024, told the official website of the Iranian Football

Federation.

"I have good memories of the last tournament. I was named best player and top scorer, but those honors are not individual. We were a team, and those successes came from collective work. Without the team, these titles mean nothing," said the 33-year-old.

Despite the challenge ahead, Ahmadabbasi said the squad's depth and quality could prove decisive.

"We have a complete team. Salar Aghapour, Moslem Oladghobad and I have all been named Asian Futsal Player of the Year. Our players have strong individual and international records, and we have Vahid Shamsaei as coach, whose resume speaks for itself," he said.



● GETTY IMAGES