

# Aqapour cautions Iran against complacency at Futsal Asian Cup

## Sports Desk

Asian Futsal Player of the Year Salar Aqapour has warned his Iranian teammates not to underestimate any opponent as they prepare to defend their title at the upcoming AFC Futsal Asian Cup, which kicks off in Jakarta, Indonesia, on Tuesday.

Iran begins its quest for a record-extending 14th Asian crown against Malaysia in Group D on Wednesday, before facing Saudi Arabia two days later at the Jakarta International Velodrome.

Vahid Shamsaei's team will conclude the group stage against Afghanistan – coached by Iranian Majid Mortezaei – on Sunday. This is a repeat of their group encounter in the 2024 edition, which Iran narrowly won 3-1.

The top two teams from each group will advance to the quarterfinals.

Iran has long been the dominant force in Asia's premier futsal event, suffering only four defeats in 105 matches across the previous 17 editions. Two of those losses came in finals against Japan – the only nation besides Iran to

have lifted the Asian trophy. However, with futsal rapidly developing across the continent in recent years, Aqapour believes Iran must navigate a series of tricky tests against emerging Asian powers.

"We saw how impressively Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia performed at the Islamic Solidarity Games [last November] Malaysia also had a decent run in the Asian Cup qualifiers. Asian futsal has progressed significantly in recent years, and we will have to work hard to defend our title," Aqapour told the Tasnim News Agency.

Afghanistan, which reached the last 16 in its World Cup debut in 2024, held Iran to a 2-2 draw at the Islamic Solidarity Games (ISG) in Riyadh. Saudi Arabia also impressed at the event on home soil, causing African powerhouse Morocco considerable trouble in the semifinals before falling 6-3 after extra time. "All teams will be highly motivated and will play to their full capacity when facing Iran at the Asian Cup, but we are a cut above. Iran is a global futsal

power, as we demonstrated with our commanding 5-0 victory over Morocco in the ISG final," Aqapour added. "The draw against Afghanistan in Riyadh was simply an anomaly. They are a respectable team, but I'm confident that result will not be repeated," said the left winger, who was part of the team that defeated Thailand in the previous final.

Aqapour remained unfazed by the prospect of meeting one of the tournament favorites in the quarterfinals, stating: "We will likely play Japan or Uzbekistan, though it doesn't really matter which team we face in the knockout stages. Whether it's in the quarterfinals or later, God willing, we will win and advance." Addressing the high expectations placed on him as the reigning Asian Player of the Year, Aqapour said: "Other players in the Iranian squad have won this award before me. The achievement was the result of collective work, and I received this prestigious prize on behalf of all my teammates. We have three award winners on the roster, and I hope our teamwork will bring success to



Salar Aqapour celebrates with the Iranian flag after the futsal final victory over Morocco at the Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on November 11, 2025.

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Iran at the Asian Cup." Moslem Oladqobad was named the 2022 Asian Player of the Year, with prolific pivot Saeid Ahmadabasi winning the prize the following year.

"All players have worked hard and remained motivated from the start of the training camp through the final squad selection. The team is a blend of young talents and experienced

players.

"We have had a proper training camp. We played Russia in a couple of friendlies and competed in the Islamic Solidarity Games, which laid the groundwork

for Asian Cup success. We were disappointed, however, that our friendly against Iraq was cancelled, as it disrupted the coaching staff's preparations for the tournament."

## Persepolis signs Hungarian fullback Gera; Sepahan seals Mohebbi loan

### Sports Desk



Hungarian fullback Dániel Gera is the second winter signing for Persepolis following Uzbekistan international striker Igor Sergeev.

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Persian Gulf Pro League club Persepolis has completed the signing of Hungarian fullback Dániel Gera from Diósgyőr VTK in Hungary's top flight, the Nemzeti Bajnokság I. The season-and-a-half-long contract ends the Tehran Reds' search for a replacement for former PSG and Tottenham fullback Serge Aurier on the right side of the defense, after the high-profile Ivorian parted ways with the club last month.

Aurier joined Persepolis with high expectations last summer, but an injury-hit campaign limited him to only five appearances in the first half of the ongoing domestic league season, with 19-year-old Yaqoub Barajeh serving as the first-

choice right-back. Gera, 30, recorded one goal and two assists in 17 games for Diósgyőr in the Hungarian league and cup this season. A former Hungarian U21 international, Gera has four senior caps to his name, with his last appearance coming in a 1-1 draw against Germany in the UEFA Nations League in November 2024. His move marks the second winter signing for Persepolis and Brazilian head coach Osmar Loss Vieira, following Uzbekistan international striker Igor Sergeev. Sergeev scored in his second outing to help the Reds beat Sepahan 2-1 in the so-called 'Iranian Clásico' on Friday, a result that saw Persepolis leapfrog its familiar foe to take top spot in the table.

Persepolis is reportedly on the verge of signing Iranian U23 defender Farzin Mo'amelehgari from Shams Azar, as Osmar seeks to provide competition for Milad Mohammadi in the left-back position.

### Sepahan completes Mohebbi move

Meanwhile, Sepahan has signed Mohammad-Mahdi Mohebbi on loan from Emirati club Ittihad Kalba until the end of the season. Mohebbi scored nine goals and provided 10 assists in 37 appearances across all competitions for Sepahan last season before departing for the United Arab Emirates in August. That successful campaign earned the 25-year-old his international debut in a dead rubber against Qatar in the World Cup qualifiers

in June. He later netted his first goal and provided an assist for Team Melli in a 3-0 victory over North Korea.

Mohebbi, however, struggled to make an impact in the UAE's ADNOC Pro League, failing to register a goal or assist in nine appearances while also missing seven games due to injury and suspension.

The left-footed winger last featured in Kalba's 3-1 away defeat to Sharjah FC last week, where he was substituted at halftime. The deal provides a major boost for Sepahan head coach Moharram Navidkia, who must cope without top scorer Mohammad Askari for the rest of the season. The young striker suffered a torn ligament while on duty with Iran at the U23 Asian Cup earlier this month.

## Karate One-Premier League 2026

### Asgari settles for bronze as Iranians disappoint in Istanbul

#### Sports Desk

Bahman Asgari was the sole Iranian karateka to claim a medal at the latest Karate One-Premier League event, as the country endured a below-par campaign in Istanbul, Turkey.

The former world champion recovered from a semifinal setback against home favorite Omer Faruk Yurur to beat Ukraine's Heorhii Pitsul 6-0 in the men's kumite -75kg third-place bout, securing a joint-bronze alongside Ja-

pan's Yusei Sakiyama. In the men's -60kg class, Abolfazl Hamdamjou suffered defeats against Chile's Ruiz Enrique Villalon (2-0) and Italy's Angelo Crescenzo (6-1), sandwiching an 8-2 victory over Kuwait's Abdalhadi Alajmi. Finishing as runner-up in Pool 3, he missed out on a place in the knockout phase.

Reigning world bronze medalist Saleh Abazari also failed to progress in the men's +84kg event. Abazari defeated Dutch karateka Is-

sam Najdi (3-1) and Japan's Yuta Mori (4-3) but lost 5-4 to Kazakhstan's Dias Anarbekov in the pool phase. Mahmoud Nemati was the other Iranian in the +84kg category, exiting in the pools after a 3-0 setback against neutral athlete Ivan Kudzinai of Belarus.

Nemati opened his campaign with a 1-0 win over Russian Kirill Kovalev – also competing under the WKF flag – and later defeated Poland's Pawel Kiryluk on criteria (1-1), ultimately fin-

ishing second in Pool 7. In the women's individual kata, Iranian Fatemeh Sadeghi defeated Portugal's Rita Marques (6-1) and Egypt's Jana Raafat (7-0) before a 5-2 loss to Italy's Carola Casale ended her hopes of a quarterfinal spot.

Iran's Bahman Asgari won the men's kumite -75kg bronze medal at the latest Karate One-Premier League event in Istanbul, Turkey.

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