

# Qalenoey forced to rethink flank options after double injury blow

## Sports Desk

With the FIFA World Cup fast approaching, Iran head coach Amir Qalenoey is grappling with a selection dilemma on the flanks of his starting XI after two of his key wingers suffered major injury setbacks within 24 hours over the weekend.

Lech Poznań's in-form winger Ali Qolizadeh has been ruled out of the showpiece after tearing the anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee during Saturday's victory over Motor Lublin.

"Qolizadeh will face surgery in the coming days, followed by several months of rehabilitation," the club said in a statement on Monday.

Iranian captain Alireza Jahanbakhsh, meanwhile, faces a race against time to be fit for his fourth World Cup participation following a muscle problem sustained during Belgian top-flight relegation playoff action on Sunday.

Should Iran's Supreme



National Security Council give the go-ahead for the national team to take part in the World Cup – amid Iran's military conflict with the United States and Israel

– Qalenoey's men will open their Group G campaign against New Zealand in Los Angeles on June 15. With Iranian domestic league players set to be out

of competitive action until the global event, Qalenoey will likely have to build his team around his overseas players. However, the recent setbacks have added

Iranian winger Ali Qolizadeh (11), seen in action against the United Arab Emirates in the Asian qualifiers, has been ruled out of the World Cup finals with a ligament injury. ● MAJID ASGARIPOUR/WANA

further blows to his preparation program – beyond ongoing issues related to securing friendly matches and visa approvals for players who completed their military service in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Qalenoey remains hopeful that Jahanbakhsh's fate will differ from Qolizadeh's, though the head coach is also preparing for the worst-case scenario by exploring alternatives.

Candidates to fill the right-wing position include Mohammad Mohebi, Mehdi Qayedi, and Mehdi Hashemnejad. Mohebi and Qayedi have previously played together effectively – having shared experience at Esteghlal – with Mohebi drifting to the right and Qayedi operating on the left.

The current mini-camp also features Mohammad-Mehdi Mohebi, Arya Yousefi, and Amir-Hossein Mahmoudi, all of whom are vying for a spot. Notably, Yousefi has been pushed forward by the head coach

from full-back and could emerge as a surprise inclusion. Allahyar Sayyadmanesh, a versatile striker capable of playing on the right, is another option.

Among the hopefuls, 17-year-old Mahmoudi has had a meteoric rise: in less than a month, he earned his top-flight debut for Persepolis, scored a goal, and joined the national team camp. If selected for the trip to the United States, he could become the youngest Iranian player in World Cup history.

Qalenoey's immediate priority is awaiting official confirmation of Jahanbakhsh's condition. Meanwhile, Iran's training camp in Turkey is set to begin next week, where overseas players will join their domestic counterparts. With 40 days until Iran's opening game, the clock is ticking for Qalenoey – who is eager to lead Team Melli to a maiden knockout-stage berth in seven attempts – to resolve one of the most critical challenges of the World Cup buildup.

## Ajami aiming for Asian Games glory after Sanya success

## Sports Desk

Iranian shot putter Hassan Ajami says he will be looking to build on his gold-winning campaign at the Asian Beach Games in Sanya, China, when chasing glory at September's Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games. Ajami opened the account for the Iranian delegation at the multi-sport event – thanks to a sixth and final effort of 20.17m that saw the Iranian beat the host nation's Chen Chengyu and Zhang Haochen to the top prize – as the country, represented by 57 athletes across 10 sports, went on to finish third behind China and Thailand in the medals table with nine golds and a single silver. "The level of competition was very high, and most teams arrived at full strength. The results and records achieved in this

edition were notably better than the previous one, which shows just how competitive the event in Sanya was," Ajami told Mehr News Agency. Regarding his own performance, Ajami said: "I am pretty satisfied with how I did. I managed to achieve my ideal mark and ultimately claim the title. "Iran's delegation traveled to the Games under difficult circumstances, but overall, I believe we achieved decent results," added the Iranian, referring to the wartime situation in the country. Ajami also opened up about his own challenges before heading to the event. "Compared to my rivals, I went through very tough days in terms of preparation. At one point, the country was going through a difficult period, and training was called

off for a while. After that, our preparation started late. In a sport like athletics, any interruption first makes you fall behind yourself, and then you fall further behind your competitors. Fortunately, I was able to produce an acceptable performance, and I am happy with the outcome." He noted an unusual reversal of fortune between two recent competitions. "Before this, at the Asian Indoor Championships in China, I had better training conditions and was in much better form, but I did not get a good result there. At the Beach Games, the situation reversed, as despite being less prepared, I managed to achieve a much better outcome." Ajami had placed fourth at the Asian Indoor event in Tianjin with a best attempt of 19.39m.

Ajami was keen to stress that the Sanya field was not weak. "It is worth noting that the gold medalist at the Asian Indoor Championships came second here. So no one can say the level of these games was low." Looking ahead, Ajami made it clear that the Asian Games later in the summer will be his primary target in the coming months. "The Beach Games served as a warm-up for Nagoya. There is not much time left until that competition. I will give everything I have to be among those selected and to perform well there." He drew a direct comparison to underscore his ambitions. "If I had recorded the same mark at the last Asian Games in Hangzhou that I achieved here, I could have won a gold medal. My goal is to be present in Nagoya and achieve a result



Iran's Hassan Ajami poses with his men's shot put gold at the Asian Beach Games in Sanya, China, on April 26, 2026. ● PAN YULONG/XINHUA

worthy of myself and my country." Addressing the lineup of Iran's athletics squad in Sanya, Ajami said: "The federation had announced that this was not the main team, and that the trip was largely for gaining experience. That does not, however,

mean that some athletes have lost their chance to go to Nagoya. Several young athletes were sent to gain experience, while others were there to win medals. I will not comment on other athletes, but I believe my own performance was a decent one."



● FIVB

## Iranian opposite Saadat joins Indonesian champion on loan

## Sports Desk

Iranian opposite spiker Bardia Saadat has sealed a loan move to Indonesian champion Jakarta Bhayangkara Presisi ahead of the upcoming AVC Men's Champions League – starting May 13 in Pontianak, Indonesia.

The 23-year-old Iranian international, who played for Alanya Spor in the Turkish top-flight's newly finished campaign, is one of several world-class players to sign short-term con-

tracts with the Indonesian outfit, which is eager to lift the trophy on home soil, having finished as runner-up and third in the 2023 and 2024 editions, respectively.

Slovenian outside hitter Rok Možič, who plays for Verona Volley in the Italian league; Cuban middle blocker Robertlandy Simón – a CEV Cup champion and MVP with Gas Sales Bluenergy Piacenza – as well as Malian opposite Noumory Keita, who won the AVC Champions League title with

Al Rayyan last year, have also joined the Indonesian champion in recent days.

Saadat will be looking to deliver an impressive performance at the Asian elite clubs' competition to boost his chances in the three-way battle for a place in the national team's starting lineup – which also features Amin Esmaeilnejad and Ali Hajipour – ahead of a congested international season. Iran will get its Volleyball Nations League campaign underway

against Brazil in the first week of action in the preliminary round in Brasília on June 10.

Italian head coach Roberto Piazza's team will also chase a fifth Asian Championship title in eight editions from September 4 in Fukuoka, Japan, where the top team will secure direct qualification for the LA 2028 Olympics.

A fourth consecutive men's gold will be up for grabs when Iran takes part at the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games in September.