

Iran can do 'something epic' at World Cup, Qalenoeei tells FIFA

FIFA – Thrice continental champions and semi-finalists at the previous two editions of the Asian Cup, Iran are a long-established juggernaut on their home patch. Translating that continental success to global impact has though proven a tougher than expected ask.

Regular participants they may be, with the nation having qualified for five of the past six editions of the FIFA World Cup, but Iran are still surprisingly searching for a maiden appearance in the knock-out stage.

Across half a dozen tournament outings, Team Melli has made an early exit on each occasion, with only three wins from their 18 matches to date.

The belief internally is that the current side, blessed with a fine generation of experienced talent, is the one poised to finally end that run of outs, as head coach Amir Qalenoeei explains to FIFA.

"We've had many problems recently, but the players tried their best and made sacrifices. They worked so hard [through qualification] and sacrificed a lot, so it is my job to thank them.

"They can do something epic in the World Cup. They can do it; they have the technical potential to make this a World Cup to remember."

Situated in a group containing a trio of continental heavyweights in the form of Belgium, Egypt



and New Zealand, the going certainly won't be easy. Qalenoeei can though take comfort from a qualification campaign that his side made fairly light work of, as well as a string of solid results thereafter.

Outside of the three co-hosts, Iran were the third nation to secure qualification, doing so on 20 March last year, five days after their AFC brethren Japan became the first nation to punch

their ticket to North America. Their only defeat in those 16 AFC preliminaries came at the hands of Qatar, after qualification was already secure. Since then, they've reached the final of the CAFA Nations Cup and drawn with fellow World Cup-bound nations Cabo Verde and Uzbekistan at an invitational tournament in the United Arab Emirates last year.

Another invitational event, held

in Türkiye last month, saw a narrow loss at the hands of Nigeria, followed by a thumping 5-0 win against Costa Rica.

Set against the backdrop of an ongoing conflict that has shuttered the domestic league, forced the national team to play abroad and created numerous logistical issues, the veteran coach is proud of his team's resolve.

"I am really proud of this team for many reasons, because we've

faced a difficult situation with all the problems and concerns, one of which was being unable to host games, but we were one of the first teams to qualify for the World Cup.

"Iran has a special talent whereby in tough times we find or create solutions. We managed to get to this level in spite of a difficult situation. Currently, there are two months to go until the World Cup, but we are in very difficult moment.

"My view though is that through football we can bring joy to families and Iranian society, both inside and outside the country. Football is a concept or project that can bring states and nations closer together. That can be national or global, like Argentina or Brazil having fans everywhere.

"Football in Iran is also like that and I hope that through football we can bring about national unity, despite the current problems in our country. We love our people and want to bring them happiness. I hope we can do that through football.

"My goal is for there to be no war anywhere in the world so people can enjoy football and enjoy their lives. This is my message through football to the world and my people."

Born in Tehran, Qalenoeei has been at the coalface of Iranian football for close to half a century. As a player, he began his

youth career at Rah Ahan, just a year after Iran's debut World Cup outing, at Argentina 1978.

The bulk of his playing days were spent at Tehran giants Esteghlal, where the former midfielder earned more than a dozen national team caps, before transitioning into coaching in 1999, a year after Iran ended a 20-year wait to make a second World Cup appearance.

Now 62, there is little that Qalenoeei hasn't experienced in a career that has risen and fallen with the concurrent highs and lows of Iranian football.

Set against that vast well of experience it is notable that, in spite of the obstacles the team faces, Qalenoeei is adamant that Iran has the capability to write a new chapter in their footballing history this northern summer.

"We want to create some great memories at this World Cup. We're ready with the experience that the team has from previous World Cups to make it through to the knock-out round for the first time. We won't be satisfied with just the group stage but I want us to play good football, not just try to get results.

"I also want to thank our wonderful fans, both inside and outside the country, who have stuck by the national team. They are the reason we managed to qualify. I probably had the least important role of anyone."

IWF World Junior Championships: Iran off the mark as Zarei bags double medals



Iranian weightlifter Hamidreza Zarei is seen in action in the men's -94kg event at the IWF World Junior Championships in Ismailia, Egypt, on May 7, 2026.

● IWF

Sports Desk

Hamidreza Zarei opened Iran's account at the IWF World Junior Weightlifting Championships in Ismailia, Egypt, by collecting a silver and a bronze medal on the fifth day of competition.

Competing in the men's -94kg event, Zarei registered three successful lifts in the snatch category but was unlucky to miss out on the podium, finishing fourth with 162kg.

Georgian Goga Jajvani bagged the snatch gold with 167kg – one kilogram clear of Chilean silver medalist Mauricio Loaiza, with Armenia's Valerik Movsisyan taking bronze on 164kg. Zarei delivered a much-im-

proved performance in the clean & jerk contest to secure silver with a 204kg lift, despite failing with his third and final attempt of 212kg. Loaiza claimed the C&J gold with 207kg, while Jajvani settled for bronze with 200kg.

Zarei's 366kg tally earned him the bronze total medal – the third world junior medal of the Iranian's career, after the -96kg clean & jerk gold he won in Lima, Peru, last year.

Loaiza (373kg) and Jajvani (367kg) won the total gold and silver, respectively.

Mohammad-Amin Habibi was the other Iranian in the -94kg class on Thursday, finishing sixth in both snatch and C&J categories

with 161kg and 187kg respectively, before placing fifth in the total standings. Amir-Mohammad Rahmati and Mohammad-Amin Dadvand were the first Iranians on the platform in Ismailia, competing in the men's -88kg division on Wednesday. Rahmati stood seventh in total with a 152-180-332 performance, while Dadvand crashed out after three failed attempts in clean & jerk.

Coached by former world and Olympic champion Sohrab Moradi, the Iranian eight-man squad had arrived in Ismailia only late on Monday after a visa delay threatened to derail their participation in the showpiece.

Iranian coach Mansourian pens contract extension with Al Talaba

Sports Desk

Iranian head coach Alireza Mansourian has signed a contract extension with Al Talaba that commits his future to the club until the end of the 2028/29 season, the Iraq Stars League outfit announced on Thursday.

The new deal came after Al Talaba claimed 14 victories from 25 games, suffering five defeats, in the Iraqi top flight since the 54-year-old Iranian took charge last November.

"According to the club management's plan, Mansourian will not be solely responsible for the senior team but is also set to directly oversee the development of the youth setup at the club," Al Talaba said in a statement, adding that the five-time domestic league champion – which last lifted the top-flight trophy in 2002 – aims to "implement a long-term structural and technical project to build a competitive team for the upcoming seasons."

Mansourian's men fell to a 1-0 home loss against Al Zawraa last time out in the league on Tuesday, dropping to fifth in the table with 61 points – one behind Al Zawraa in fourth and 16 adrift of runaway leaders Al-Quwa Al-Jawiya – with five rounds of fixtures remaining. Al Talaba sat 12th in the 20-team table with three wins and three losses from seven games when Mansourian was appointed to the job.



● AL TALABA

Iranian chess prodigy Movahed crowned at Baku Open

Sports Desk

Young Iranian grandmaster Sina Movahed, who turns 16 this month, emerged victorious at the Baku Open 2026, finishing with an impressive score of 8/9.

The main event in the Azerbaijani capital – featuring players rated 2250 and above in the FIDE rankings – was a fiercely contested tournament, with as many as five players sharing the lead after Round 6.

In the seventh round, India's Mayank Chakraborty and Movahed scored vic-



● FIDE

tories over Indian grandmaster Pranav Anand and the host's Khagan Ahmad, respectively, to surge ahead.

The penultimate round saw the clash of the joint leaders, in which Movahed pulled off a crucial victory. Heading into the

final round a full point ahead of five players – including second seed Ruslan Ponomarev – Movahed prevailed over Pranav in a topsy-turvy battle to secure the title and \$10,000 in prize money.

Rated 2575, Movahed is 22nd in the latest FIDE standard junior ranking – released by the sport's international governing body for May – and is fifth in the Iranian men's rankings, behind Mohammad-Amin Tabatabaei, Parham Maghsoudlou, Bardiya Daneshvar, and Pouya Idani.