

Azmoun omitted as Iran names provisional World Cup squad



Iranian national team players are in action during an intra-squad game in Tehran, Iran, on May 6, 2026.
● MAHDI ZARE/FFIRI

Sports Desk

Iran head coach Amir Qalenoee has named a provisional 30-man list for the upcoming FIFA World Cup, which will be co-hosted by the United States, Mexico, and Canada from June 11.

The Iranian squad will head to Antalya, Turkey, in the coming days for its final training camp ahead of what is set to be the most politically charged campaign in the history of Iranian sport, amid the country's military conflict with the United States and Israel. Iran will kick off its Group G campaign against New Zealand at SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, California, on June 15, before facing European heavyweight Belgium at the same venue six days later. The team will then travel to Seattle, Washington, to face Egypt in its final group game at Lumen Field on June 26.

Sardar Azmoun is the most high-profile absentee, as the Shabab Al Ahli striker is set to miss out on a third successive World Cup. Iran's joint-second all-time top scorer with 57 goals in 91 appearances, Azmoun missed the best part of the UAE Pro League season due to two major injury setbacks and has managed only three starts – finding the net twice – since returning to action in late February.

His omission, however, is believed to be driven by off-field issues, following his controversial social media post regarding the war in the early stages of the conflict, which began with U.S.-Israeli airstrikes on Tehran on February 28.

Qalenoee insisted that "nothing other than technical criteria" played a part in his team selection.

"Selecting the squad for the final pre-World Cup training camp was one of the toughest decisions of my coaching career. Over the past 48 hours, I had to choose only 30 players, despite the technical merit of all those who have been part of the national team matrix over the past two years and have worked for Iran's success," Qalenoee said.

"I chose the 30 players based solely on my technical standards. I just hope that those who did not get the chance to be part of the World Cup roster will still have the opportunity to wear the national team jersey in future events," added the Iranian coach, who is eager to lead Team Melli to its first-ever knockout spot at the World Cup at the seventh attempt.

Allahyar Sayyadmanesh is also a surprise absentee, after the 24-year-old winger enjoyed an impressive season with KVC Westerlo in the Belgian top flight, bagging seven goals and five assists in 29 outings. Tractor full-back Danial Esmaeilifar and his club teammate Mahdi Hashemnejad, as well as Dynamo Makhachkala midfielder Mohammad-Javad Hosseinejad, were also unlucky to be overlooked by Qalenoee despite successful campaigns with their respective clubs.

Dennis Eckert Dargahi, who received his first international call-up in March, has been named in the list. The former German under-19 international contributed seven goals in 35 appearances across domestic competitions for Belgian top-tier club Standard Liège this season.

FIFA support

Meanwhile, a FIFA delegation led by Secretary General Mattias Grafström met with Iranian Football Federation (FFIRI) officials in Istanbul on Saturday to offer reassurance and support regarding Team Melli's World Cup participation.

"FIFA President Gianni Infantino has stressed that Iran will be eagerly welcomed in North America during what promises to be the most inclusive sporting event in history. Speaking to FFIRI chairman Mahdi Taj and his colleagues at the Turkish Football Federation (TFF) headquarters, Grafström reiterated FIFA's position and outlined organizers' plans to make Iran's World Cup experience as seamless, productive and enjoyable as possible," the governing body's official website wrote of Saturday's meeting.

"We've had an excellent meeting – a constructive meeting together with the Iran FA. We're working closely together and looking very much forward to welcoming them to the FIFA World Cup 2026," Grafström said. "We had the opportunity to discuss some of the operational matters, like we do with every member association. I'm very happy that we were able to have this positive exchange, and both the Iran FA and FIFA are very happy with the meeting and looking forward to welcoming Team Melli in the USA, Canada and Mexico."

Taj, meanwhile, said, "We had a positive and constructive meeting with FIFA. We discussed our concerns and expressed our joint commitment to ensure the smooth participation of Team Melli at the World

Cup."

This was the latest twist in the months-long saga of Team Melli's World Cup campaign.

Taj, a former member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and his two colleagues abruptly left Toronto, abandoning their onward trip to Vancouver for the 76th FIFA Congress in early May, following a clash with Canadian border officials. While media reports suggested that immigration authorities denied the delegation entry into Canada, Taj insisted that it was their own decision to leave the North American country after exhaustive questioning about his ties with the IRGC – which Canada listed as a "terrorist group" in 2024 – and "offensive insults directed at the country's proud armed forces."

Despite Grafström's latest remarks, concerns remain that Iranian players who completed their military service in the IRGC could experience U.S. visa complications. U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said earlier in the month that the Team Melli squad would be welcome at the tournament but indicated that some federation members with "ties to the IRGC" may experience difficulties.

The following is the Iranian provisional squad for the World Cup:

Goalkeepers: Alireza Beiranvand (Tractor), Payam Niazmand (Persepolis), Seyyed Hossein Hosseini (Sepahan), Mohammad Khalifeh (Iranco)

Defenders: Shoja Khalilzadeh (Tractor), Ali Ne'mati (Foolad Khuzestan), Hossein Kan'anizadegan (Persepolis), Danial Eiri (Malavan FC), Ramin Rezaeian (Foolad Khuzestan), Saleh Hardani (Esteghlal), Milad Mohammadi (Persepolis), Ehsan Hajzafi (Sepahan)

Midfielders: Saeid Ezzatollahi (Shabab Al Ahli), Rouzbeh Cheshmi (Esteghlal), Mohammad Qorbani (Al Wahda), Amirmohammad Razaqinia (Esteghlal), Omid Nourafkan (Sepahan), Saman Qoddous (Kalba FC), Hadi Habibinejad (Chadormalou), Alireza Jahanbakhsh (Dender EH), Mohammad Mohebbi (Rostov), Aria Yousefi (Sepahan), Mahdi Qayedi (Al Nasr), Mahdi Torabi (Tractor), Amirhossein Mahmoudi (Persepolis)

Strikers: Mahdi Taremi (Olympiacos), Amirhossein Hosseinzadeh (Tractor), Dennis Eckert Dargahi (Standard Liège), Ali Alipour (Persepolis), Kasra Taheri (Paykan).

The list will be trimmed to 26 for the World Cup.

Iran to play Brazil in friendly double-header before VNL

Sports Desk

The Iranian men's national volleyball team will face Brazil in a friendly double-header ahead of the upcoming Volleyball Nations League (VNL), the Iranian Volleyball Federation has announced.

The two games – scheduled for June 2 and 4 – will be part of Iran's week-long preparation at the Brazilian national team's training camp in Socorro. The arrangement has been facilitated by the International Volleyball Federation (FIVB) and the Brazilian governing body of the sport, amid the Iranian team's urgent circumstances due to military tensions in the Middle East. Iran will get its VNL campaign underway against the South American powerhouse in Brasilia on June 10. The two sides also met on the opening day of last

year's annual event in the Brazilian capital, with the hosts emerging victorious in straight sets.

Tricky tests will come thick and fast in Week 1 of the preliminaries for Italian head coach Roberto Piazza's men. They will take on Bulgaria – finalists at last September's World Championships – on June 11, before facing Argentina and Belgium later in the week at the Nilson Nelson Gymnasium. Iran will then travel to Orléans, France, for the second week of action, starting with a mammoth task against the hosts and reigning Olympic champions France at the CO'Met Arena on June 24. This will be followed by matches against the United States (June 25), Japan (June 26), and Cuba (June 28).

The third and final week of the preliminaries will see Iran go head-to-head with

Ukraine in Belgrade on July 15, with further tests against Germany (July 16), Slovenia (July 17), and Turkey (July 19).

The top eight teams in the 18-team standings will progress to the VNL Finals, which will begin in Ningbo Beilun, China, on July 29. China is already guaranteed a place in the quarterfinals as the host nation.

Iran will aim to build on a promising first year under Piazza by securing its first quarterfinal berth in four years at the prestigious tournament. After finishing in the bottom three in the two previous editions, Iran staged a late surge in the 2025 preliminaries to place eighth with six wins from 12 matches. However, Piazza's team ultimately missed out on the finals, as China's host status secured the Asian team a quarterfinal spot despite finishing second from bottom.



● FIVB

Asian Weightlifting Championships: Nasiri bounces back to win C&J gold in heavyweight class

Sports Desk

Iranian weightlifter Alireza Nasiri recovered from a disappointing start to his men's 110kg campaign at the Asian Weightlifting Championships to grab the clean & jerk gold in Gandhinagar, India, on Sunday.

The 20-year-old Iranian had three failed attempts (187kg, 188kg, 189kg) and missed out on the snatch podium, with China's Liu Huanhua – a 102kg gold medalist at the Paris 2024 Olympics – claiming top prize in the category thanks to a 190kg lift. Chinese Taipei's Chen Po-jen (189kg) and Turkmenistan's Davranbek Hasanbayev (188kg) finished in the following spots.

Nasiri, however, delivered

a much-improved performance in the clean & jerk, starting with a 221kg lift before registering 231kg with his second effort. That was enough for the Iranian prodigy to beat the high-profile Chinese lifter to gold by one kilogram, despite missing his third attempt of 240kg. Chinese Taipei's Dong Bingcheng took the clean & jerk bronze with 215kg.

Liu Huanhua also secured the total gold with a 420kg mark, while Hasanbayev (392kg) and Dong (381kg) settled for silver and bronze, respectively.

Nasiri said: "It was my own and the head coach's plan to start with a heavy lift and compete with my rivals for the snatch medal, but unfortunately, it did not work

out." "Thank God, things went well in the clean and jerk, and I was able to win the gold medal. I hope to overcome my tough rivals in future competitions. I want to dedicate this medal to the people of Iran."

Sunday's triumph was the latest testament to Nasiri's rise as a global contender in the heavyweight class. He won a clean sweep of three golds in the 109kg event at last year's World Junior Championships in Lima – adding to his two golds from the previous edition – and set junior world records of 231kg in the clean & jerk and 414kg in the total at the Senior World Championships in Forde, Norway, later in October.



● AWF