

# Iranian coach Veisi urges 'attack-minded approach' as Team Melli targets historic World Cup breakthrough

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## INTERVIEW

Iranian coach and football expert Abdollah Veisi has urged the national team and head coach Amir Qalenoeei to adopt an attacking style of play as they seek to reach the World Cup knockout stage for the first time in the country's seventh appearance at the tournament.

As Iran prepares to kick off its Group G campaign on Monday, the national team faces not only the usual sporting and technical challenges but also a range of off-field obstacles and restrictions. From the disruptions caused by the recent wartime conditions in the country and their impact on preparations, to visa limitations imposed by the United States as the tournament co-host, Iran's participation in this edition of the World Cup has taken on a distinctly different character. While many participating nations have benefited from extensive preparation programs and hassle-free access to host cities, Iran's national team, which is set to play all its group-stage matches on U.S. soil, was forced to move its training base to the



Abdollah Veisi

Mexican border city of Tijuana from Tucson, Arizona, as originally planned – a measure taken by the Iranian Football Federation (FFIRI) to avoid possible visa denials for members of the delegation.

In addition to the denial of visas to 15 members of the team's support staff, Team Melli has been cleared to enter Los Angeles and Seattle only 24 hours before each of its three group-stage matches, rather than the customary two days in advance, prompting concerns that the restrictions could disrupt preparations and affect performance. Nevertheless, many figures within Iranian football believe the national team has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to produce strong – and sometimes surprising – results under difficult conditions. They point to the experience of the squad, the presence of Iranian internationals playing overseas, and some positive results over previous World Cup appearances as reasons for optimism.

Ahead of Iran's Group G opener against New Zealand at SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles on Monday, veteran coach Veisi, who guided Esteghlal Khuzestan to a historic Persian Gulf Pro League title in 2016, shared his views with Iran Daily on Team Melli's preparations, Amir Qalenoeei's squad selection, the team's prospects of reaching the knockout stage, and the challenges posed by the host nation's restrictions.

**IRAN DAILY: Mr. Veisi, how do you assess the national team's condition just days before the tournament begins? How would you evaluate the preparation process and the warm-up matches?**

**VEISI:** Given the circumstances we faced, particularly the wartime conditions in the country, we did not have ideal friendly matches. To be fair, even before the conflict, the national team's preparation schedule was not particularly strong. However, the suspension of domestic football did provide

one advantage: The national team's camps began much earlier than usual.

Many national teams only assembled their squads last week after their domestic seasons ended. As we saw, the UEFA Champions League final concluded only a few days ago, and players have only recently returned from their clubs to join their national teams. Our squad, by contrast, came together early and in an organized manner. Although we lacked high-quality friendlies, we had productive training camps. I cannot say the league suspension benefited us, because it was forced upon us, but neither did it harm us significantly. While domestic football was halted, our overseas-based players remained active in competitive environments. The camps were well run, and the players reached a reasonably good level of physical and mental readiness through training sessions and intrasquad matches. Overall, I believe we can perform well at the World Cup, even though we face difficult circumstances.

**Given that Iran's overseas-based players were actively competing while domestic players were not, would it have been better to call up more expatriate players and successful performers from foreign leagues?**

Yes, as I mentioned, our overseas players joined the national team directly from competitive league football and were naturally in better match condition than many domestic players.

That said, the current squad reflects the head coach's preferences. He has selected players according to a tactical vision and a specific plan, and it would be unfair to criticize him for that. These players may fit his tactical puzzle better than others.

Every squad selection can be debated, and perhaps some deserving players were left out. Critics are entitled to express their views, but the coaching staff and analysts have monitored players for months, closely following their physical and technical condition. They are in a far better position than anyone else to judge who deserves a call-up.

Since we do not have firsthand knowledge of every player's condition, we cannot confidently say who should have been included or excluded. Therefore, we should respect the coaching staff's decisions – especially now, when this is not the time to undermine the team through excessive criticism.

**What is your personal opinion of the squad selection?**

Personally, if I were the national team coach, I would have taken a younger, more energetic squad to the World Cup.

However, Mr. Qalenoeei and his staff apparently believe that a more experienced team with a higher average age will produce better results. Had they been less cautious and included more young players, it could have significantly benefited the team ahead of next January's AFC Asian Cup.

A World Cup provides young players with invaluable experience, maturity, and self-confidence. It helps create stars not only for the next four years but potentially for the next World Cup cycle as well. On the other hand, being cut from the squad at the last moment can



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have a serious psychological impact on young players. For any footballer, the World Cup is a lifelong dream. I know many of those who missed out are struggling mentally right now. Some may require psychological support to return to normal competitive form. Still, we must respect the coaching staff's judgment. They believe this squad gives Iran the best chance of success, and we all hope they are right.

**Carlos Queiroz achieved some success with a largely defensive approach during his three World Cup campaigns with Iran. Amir Qalenoeei promised a more attacking style when he took charge of the national team. Do you see evidence of that shift?**

For us, the World Cup is like a battlefield – we are going into a battle.

When a wrestler or a martial artist faces an opponent, the strategy depends on both their own strengths and those of the opponent. Sometimes you attack; sometimes you defend.

The same principle applies to football. You cannot decide in advance that you will play either offensively or defensively throughout a tournament. If our team is stronger than the opposition, then naturally we should attack. If not, we may need to defend and rely on counterattacks.

Among our group-stage opponents, only Belgium is a team against whom we should be cautious. Against New Zealand and Egypt, I believe we have enough quality to play attacking football. Against Belgium, however, we cannot simply line up with an aggressive mindset. We will have to see how the match unfolds and decide whether to push forward or stay compact.

**Do you believe Iran can finally advance beyond the group stage, something it has failed to do in previous World Cups?** Absolutely. In fact, I would say the real surprise would be if we failed to advance. New Zealand and Egypt are teams on our level, and based on our experience and current squad, we should be capable of getting past them. We have many experienced players and a large number of footballers competing abroad. The team must take the field with a winning mentality.

A few days ago, I read an interview with Japan's captain, who said, "We are going to the World Cup to become champions." The logic behind that statement is that Japan defeated giants such as Spain and Germany at the last World Cup.

Meanwhile, for the past eight months, we have been asking ourselves whether we can merely get out of our group.

If we fail to advance this time, we might as well shut down our football program, because advancing from the group is easier than it was in previous editions. There were fewer spots and tougher groups. The expansion of the tournament has made qualification more achievable, allowing teams like New Zealand to participate.

Even without expansion, I would still expect us to advance. We are no less capable than South Korea or Japan. What needs to change is our mentality. We must enter these matches believing we can win.

**Beyond mentality, does Iran actually possess the attacking quality needed to win games and play proactively?**

Our attacking potential is good and deserves respect. However, we would have been even stronger if Sardar Azmoun were available.

We pushed Sardar away. He is a young man from this country, and even if he made mistakes, we should have welcomed him back. His family and supporters are understandably disappointed.

That said, our attacking line remains very strong. We have quality players in advanced positions, and hopefully they will be able to create opportunities and score goals against our opponents.

**Given the visa restrictions, which require the team to arrive in the host city only 24 hours before each match and depart immediately afterward, how much of an impact could this have on performance?**

Naturally, it is preferable to spend several days at the match venue and train in the stadium.

But let me give you an example. When I coached Esteghlal Khuzestan, there were occasions when flights to Tehran were unavailable and we had to endure long bus journeys with limited rest. In those situations, we adapted

through proper planning. The national team must do the same now. Traveling from Mexico to the United States takes only a few hours by air. In fact, the journey is shorter than travel between many cities in our own country.

Therefore, I do not think the loss of 24 hours is critically important. What matters is ensuring that the players are managed properly from a psychological standpoint so they do not allow these circumstances to affect them negatively.

**Some have argued that Iran should have boycotted the World Cup altogether because of what they see as discriminatory treatment regarding visas and related issues. What is your view?**

I believe Iran should participate, both for footballing reasons and for reasons beyond football.

Even if some members of the support staff are unable to accompany the team to the tournament because of the host country's decisions, that should not deprive us of the opportunity to take part in such an important event.

Of course, it would have been better if everyone could attend. But that is not a reason to exclude ourselves. If the United States wants to create controversy, we should not make matters more difficult for ourselves.

At this point, there is no need to focus on these distractions or create additional anxiety among either the public or the players.

**Given the wartime conditions in the country, some believe expectations are lower than usual. Does that reduce pressure on the players?**

Actually, as someone involved in football, I fully expect the national team to advance from the first round. Anything less would be surprising. People expect Iran to beat teams like New Zealand and Egypt. Although many citizens are struggling because of the situation in the country, football can help lift spirits.

In my opinion, Iran will definitely advance from its group. Our national team – and our people – deserve not only to progress from the group stage but also to move beyond the first knockout round. Technically, we are a strong team with experienced and talented players.

That is why I remain optimistic.