

## FIFA World Cup:

# 'Like a disaster': Qalenoey, Taremi decry Iran's mistreatment after New Zealand draw

## Sports Desk

Iran head coach Amir Qalenoey and skipper Mahdi Taremi expressed frustration over the co-host's treatment of their team after opening their World Cup campaign with a 2-2 draw against New Zealand in Group G in Los Angeles, California, on Monday. Elijah Just gave New Zealand the lead early in each half, only to see Iran fight back twice through Ramin Rezaeian and Mohammad Mohebbi to salvage a point at SoFi Stadium.

Iran's preparation for the showpiece was dominated by months of politically charged controversy amid a military conflict between the country and co-host United States, which was perhaps evident in Sunday's pre-match press conference, when Taremi quipped in his closing remarks that "nobody asked football-related questions."

However, for more than 100 minutes of action on the pitch, Team Melli was finally able to focus on the beautiful game itself.

Qalenoey's men – six of whom had been without competitive football since late February due to wartime circumstances in the country – were caught off guard seven minutes into the game as Just linked up with Nottingham Forest striker Chris Wood before smashing home a half-volley from inside the box.

Rezaeian drew Iran level shortly after the half-hour



Iran's Ramin Rezaeian (23) celebrates with teammates after scoring during a 2-2 draw against New Zealand at the FIFA World Cup in Los Angeles, California, U.S., on June 15, 2026. **REUTERS**

mark, reacting quickest to a blocked shot to poke the ball past the advancing goalkeeper – a historic strike for the 35-year-old fullback, who became the first Iranian to score at different World Cups. Just put his side back in front by combining with Wood again and lofting the ball over Iranian goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand nine minutes after the break.

Iran restored parity for a second time 10 minutes later, with Rezaeian delivering an inch-perfect cross for Mo-

hebbi to power a header in off the inside of the post. After the match, Qalenoey said the Iranian delegation was ordered to leave the United States and return to its training base in Mexico only a few hours after the game.

The team had expected to spend the night in California to maximize its recovery time, only to be told that everyone had to immediately board a flight for the 140-mile trip back to Tijuana. "They didn't even give us time

to recover," Qalenoey said through an interpreter. "After the game today, they said to us, 'You have to leave immediately.' It's very important for us to have time for recovery, but we are being asked to get on a plane and return to our camp in Tijuana, and we are really troubled by that."

"We don't know why they are sending us back, to be honest," Qalenoey said. "I think it's very strange. It seems like others are doing the planning for us. The decision-making for us is being made else-

where. We were supposed to come two nights before the game, and we were supposed to stay tonight to recover and return tomorrow at lunchtime. We have no idea why.

"I think our team is perhaps the most oppressed at the World Cup."

Taremi and Qalenoey both decried the absence of several important staff members who were denied visas by the United States, further complicating the team's preparations.

"We have to leave Los Angeles right now, and it's not good for us," Taremi said about an hour after the match. "I think FIFA has to help us more than this. ... Everything is like a disaster, actually, for us."

Qalenoey said several players developed cramps during the game, which was played in mild conditions, attributing the physical issues to the lack of proper preparation time caused by Iran's bureaucratic and diplomatic obstacles.

"Before the game, I said we haven't had time to adjust because of the travel," Qalenoey said. "Many of our players had cramps, and that's why we had to substitute them. It wasn't for technical reasons. It was because of injuries and cramping. They will be examined on Tuesday by our medical staff, but the fact that they delayed our arrival and are forcing us to go back early without time for recovery is making the situation more difficult."

Several hundred Iranian

Americans seized the occasion in Los Angeles – home to a large Iranian diaspora community – to protest against the Islamic Republic outside the venue and in the stands by displaying Lion and Sun flags, Iran's official flag before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, despite FIFA's attempts to keep them away.

Yet the vast majority of the crowd vocally supported the Iranian players once the match kicked off.

"I think today marked a watershed moment for our football," Qalenoey said, adding: "Many Iranians with different views and beliefs were in the stadium, but they all united in support of their national team and cheered with all their hearts. To me, that was the true victory of this match. Around 70,000 people attended the game, a large number of them Iranians, and they supported Iran wholeheartedly. This could prove to be a turning point in our country's history."

Taremi echoed his coach's sentiment, saying: "It was an incredible atmosphere throughout the match. It felt like home for us."

The result, coupled with the 1-1 stalemate between Belgium and Egypt earlier in the day, left all four Group G teams level on points.

Iran will return to SoFi Stadium on Sunday to take on European heavyweight Belgium before facing Egypt five days later at Lumen Field in Seattle, Washington.

## Hedayati stuns Mirzazadeh as Iran completes Greco-Roman squad for Wrestling Worlds

## Sports Desk

Fardin Hedayati pulled off a major upset on Tuesday, defeating reigning world super-heavyweight champion Amin Mirzazadeh to secure Iran's Greco-Roman 130kg berth for the Wrestling World Championships in Astana, Kazakhstan, in October.

Under the national team trials regulations, Mirzazadeh needed just one victory in the best-of-three series against his younger rival to earn a chance to pursue a third world title.

Hedayati, however, had other plans. The 22-year-old, who

owns five world gold medals across various age groups, claimed a commanding 5-1 victory in the opening bout before being awarded the second after Mirzazadeh withdrew through injury.

The victory completes Iran's Greco-Roman lineup for the World Championships and marks another statement result for one of the country's most promising heavyweights. Hedayati enjoyed a glorious 2025 campaign, winning gold at the Asian Championships, the Islamic Solidarity Games and, most notably, the U23 World Championships.

He first announced himself on the senior international stage at the 2024 Ranking Series event in Budapest, where he outmuscled Turkish legend Riza Kayaalp – winner of 13 world and Olympic medals – in the quarterfinals before defeating Georgian Olympic silver medalist Iakobi Kajaia in the final. Hedayati will head to Astana full of confidence despite Kayaalp's return to competition following an 18-month doping ban. The Turkish veteran marked his comeback by capturing gold at the European Championships in Tirana last April.

Hedayati will be part of a

star-studded Iranian squad led by reigning world and Olympic champions Saeid Esmaeili (67kg) and Mohammad-Hadi Saravi (97kg).

Looking to defend its world team title, head coach Hassan Rangraz's 10-man roster will also include world silver medalist Payam Ahmadi (55kg), Ali Ahmadi-Vafa (60kg), Mohammad-Mahdi Keshtkar (63kg), Danial Sohrabi (72kg), Ali Oskou (77kg), world champion Gholamreza Farrokhi (82kg), and Alireza Mohmadi (87kg), who has claimed back-to-back world silver medals on either side of his Olympic silver at



Fardin Hedayati (8) wrestles Amin Mirzazadeh during the Iranian national team trials in the Greco-Roman 130kg category in Kerman, Iran, on June 16, 2026. **IAWFIR**

Paris 2024. Mirzazadeh, meanwhile, is expected to represent Iran at the Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games in

Japan in September, where he will bid for a second consecutive gold medal at the continental multi-sport event.

## Interim coach Bakhtiarzadeh handed permanent Esteghlal job

## Sports Desk

Sohrab Bakhtiarzadeh has been appointed Esteghlal's head coach for the upcoming Persian Gulf Pro League season, the Iranian top-flight club announced on Tuesday.

Bakhtiarzadeh, 48, took charge on an interim basis at the Tehran Blues in late February, replacing Portuguese coach Ricardo Sa Pinto, and

led his side to a 2-1 home victory over Fajr Sepasi before the Iranian league was suspended due to the country's war with the United States and Israel.

"Following the evaluation of numerous domestic and foreign candidates, Esteghlal's technical committee and board of directors have selected Sohrab Bakhtiarzadeh as the head



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coach for next season," the club said in a statement. The former Iran international and Esteghlal center back has served as the club's interim coach on three separate occasions since October 2024.

In his first stint, Esteghlal recorded one win and two defeats in three league matches before South African coach Pitso Mosimane was appointed as the permanent head

coach.

He returned to the bench after Mosimane parted ways with the club later in the season, guiding Esteghlal to three wins and two draws in five matches across all competitions.

In the final match of his second spell in charge, Esteghlal secured a crucial 2-0 away victory over Qatar's Al Rayyan in its final league-phase

match to book a place in the AFC Champions League Elite round of 16.

Esteghlal was top of the table when the Iranian Football Federation called off the remaining seven rounds of the top-flight season, meaning the Tehran club will be joined by second-placed Tractor SC in representing Iran in the AFC Champions League Elite next season.