

Against the Odds: Young Iran turns hardship into momentum in World Cup qualifiers

Sports Desk

Iran's men's basketball team emerged as one of the standout stories of the third window of the FIBA World Cup 2027 Asian Qualifiers, overcoming months without competitive basketball and the disruption caused by the recent conflict to finish atop Group C and offer compelling evidence that a new generation is ready to carry the national team into a new era.

A squad with an average age of just 25.1 completed an impressive campaign with three consecutive victories, defeating Syria twice and avenging an earlier loss to host Jordan, despite entering the competition under far from ideal circumstances. The unbeaten run not only secured Iran's place in the next phase of qualifying but also reinforced optimism that the country's rebuilding process is gathering momentum ahead of tougher challenges against Asia's elite. Iran's preparation had been anything but routine. With the domestic league suspended and many national team players having gone more than three months without action, the squad arrived in Jordan lacking the competitive rhythm enjoyed by their rivals, many of whom had remained active in domestic and overseas leagues. The lingering effects of the recent conflict also complicated preparations, forcing the coaching staff to focus first on restoring the players' physical condition before turning their attention to tactical work.



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Head coach Sotiris Manolopoulos brought the team together in early June, assembling a pool of nearly 20 players as training began under difficult circumstances. In an effort to compensate for the lack of competitive action, much of the final squad was selected following a domestic mini-tournament involving Esteghlal, Naft Abadan and Naft Zagros Jonoubi. Although the event attracted criticism, it ultimately proved a valuable stepping stone, allowing key players to regain match fitness before the World Cup qualifiers. The benefits became increasingly evident as the tournament progressed. Iran had to

battle back after Syria opened an 11-point lead in the third quarter of the opening game, but the team responded to claim victory before producing commanding performances against Jordan and Syria in the remaining fixtures. By the end of the window, Iran had completed a clean sweep to finish top of the group, having also ended Jordan's hopes of taking first place on home court. The victories carried extra significance given the quality of the opposition. Jordan relied on American-born guard Jalen Harris, while Syria featured experienced naturalized players Freddy Ibrahim and Donte

McGill. Yet Iran's young roster consistently matched – and often outperformed – opponents strengthened by imported talent, doing so through disciplined teamwork rather than individual brilliance. Manolopoulos identified defense as the cornerstone of the campaign. "We relied on our defense in all three games," the Greek coach said after Iran secured top spot. "We played high-level defense." The coach, however, insisted there was still considerable room for improvement. "I think our shooting performance was poor, even though we created many open opportunities

and have good shooters," he said. "We need to solve that problem." That willingness to acknowledge shortcomings despite a perfect window reflected a coaching staff determined to continue the team's development as the level of competition rises in the next qualifying phase. Perhaps the most encouraging takeaway, however, was the emergence of a youthful core capable of competing on the international stage. During stretches of both the Jordan and Syria games, Iran fielded lineups with an average age below 23 following substitutions, and the younger players responded with maturity beyond their years.

Teenager Mahdi Heydari was among the brightest prospects to emerge from the campaign, while the performances of the squad's younger members suggested Iran's future extends well beyond the current qualifying cycle.

The campaign was also achieved without three of Iran's most prominent players. Behnam Yakhchali, Mohammad Amini and Sina Vahedi all missed the qualifiers, meaning the national team could become significantly stronger once the trio returns to the fold.

For Manolopoulos, the achievement extended beyond results on the court. He praised not only his players but the entire support staff for navigating a challenging period and maintaining belief throughout the preparation.

"The conditions were really difficult for us," he said. "Coming here and beating these two teams required tremendous effort from everyone. I want to thank not only the players but every member of the staff because everyone contributed."

Iran now turns its attention to the third round of the qualifiers, starting in August, where Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines will provide a far sterner examination. Yet after topping its group despite disrupted preparations, an inexperienced squad and the absence of several key players, Iran has every reason to believe its World Cup ambitions remain firmly on course.

Persepolis eyeing sweeping squad overhaul under new coach Tartar

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Newly-appointed Persepolis head coach Mahdi Tartar has wasted little time outlining an ambitious rebuilding plan, with the Tehran giants preparing for a major squad overhaul ahead of the new Persian Gulf Pro League season. The club officially unveiled Tartar as its new manager

after abandoning its pursuit of Croatian coach Dragan Skočić, handing the experienced Iranian tactician one of the most coveted jobs in domestic football. Within hours of his appointment, Persepolis also completed its first summer signing by securing winger Mehdi Tikdarinejad, signalling the start of an active transfer window. According to Iranian media reports, however, the arrival of Tikdarinejad is only the beginning of a much broader restructuring project. Tartar has reportedly promised club officials that he will rejuvenate the squad by lowering its average age while reshaping almost every department of the team.

The most significant changes are expected in defense, where Tartar is understood to have informed the club that veteran center-back Morteza Pouraliganji is not part of his plans. He is also said to have reservations about Hossein Abrquoneinejad's suitability for his tactical system.

Persepolis is now pursuing multiple defensive reinforcements, with Masoud Mohebbi, Ali Nemati, Mohammadmehdi Zare and Danial Eiri emerging as the main

targets. Reports suggest negotiations for Mohebbi and Nemati have progressed positively, while the club hopes to secure at least one of Zare or Eiri despite the financial challenges involved.

Tartar is also looking to strengthen several other positions, with a number of players from his former club Gol Gohar believed to be on his wishlist. Right-back Majid Eidi, midfielder Pouria Pourali and young forward Pouria Shahrabadi have all been linked with moves to Persepolis, while striker Kasra Taheri is another player the club is attempting to sign on loan.

At the same time, the coach has reportedly expressed a desire to retain striker Igor Sergeev and extend Ali Alipour's contract, while adding further competition in attack through younger recruits.

The overhaul could also bring an end to the Persepolis careers of several experienced figures. Reports indicate Tartar has informed club officials that captain Omid Alishah, midfielder Soroush Rafiei, defensive midfielder Milad Sarlak and Pouraliganji are surplus to requirements. Club executives have reportedly endorsed the decision despite concerns over the influence and leadership roles those players held in the dressing room. The four players have allegedly been

notified of the decision and will not be allowed to train with the first team.

Implementing the changes, however, may prove complicated. Most of the players identified for departure remain under contract, including Alishah, whose deal was automatically extended after meeting an appearance clause. Negotiating exits for high-profile players could therefore slow the club's transfer activity despite its progress in recruiting replacements.

Tartar arrives at Persepolis with one of the strongest managerial resumes in Iranian football. The 53-year-old has coached continuously in the Iranian top flight for a record 263 consecutive weeks, surpassing the previous mark of 236 weeks.

Tartar has managed 381 Premier League matches, ranking third on the all-time list behind Amir Qalenoee and Majid Jalali, and has remained in charge until the end of every season since guiding Pars Jonoubi Jam to promotion before the 2017-18 campaign.

Persepolis will become the 12th top-flight club coached by Tartar, whose reputation for stability and organization is expected to underpin a new era as the club seeks to recover from two disappointing seasons with a younger and reshaped squad.

Every game will be like a final:

Iran's Nasri ahead of VNL Week 3



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Iran outside hitter Mobin Nasri says the national team will approach every match in the third week of the FIVB Volleyball Nations League (VNL) as a final, stressing that the upcoming fixtures will be crucial in determining the team's standing in both the world rankings and the tournament table.

Iran will begin its campaign in the Serbian capital with a daunting match against surprise package Ukraine – fifth in the standings with a 5-3 record – on July 15. Head coach Roberto Piazza's men will then face Germany and Slovenia before wrapping up the preliminary phase against Turkey on July 19.

"We are facing very strong teams in the third week, and every match is like a final for us," Nasri said. "We will do everything we can to win all of our games because we know these matches are extremely important for both our world ranking and our position in the standings."

Iran defeated Cuba 3-1 (25-22, 25-21, 20-25, 30-28) in Orléans, France, last week to end a four-match losing streak in the preliminary round. Only a second victory in eight outings lifted Iran to 14th place in the 18-team standings with nine points.

The 22-year-old added that the squad has benefited from the collective efforts of everyone involved throughout the campaign. "We have played eight

matches so far, and everyone, both within and around the team, has supported us whenever the coaching staff has needed them," he said.

Nasri also reflected on his own recent performances, singling out Iran's 3-2 setback against Japan as one of his best outings of the tournament.

"I think the match against Japan was a very good one for me," he said. "After we had lost the first two sets, I was able to make a positive impact on the court, and we managed to push the match into a fifth set." The top seven teams in the preliminary standings will be joined by hosts China (17th) in the VNL Finals, which begin with the quarterfinals at Ningbo's Beilun Gymnasium on July 29.



● ISNA