

Sports Desk

Amir Qalenoeei will remain in charge of Iran through the 2027 AFC Asian Cup, which begins on January 7 in Saudi Arabia, Iranian Football Federation (FFIRI) president Mehdi Taj has confirmed.

The announcement ends recent speculation over the future of the national team's bench following a mixed World Cup campaign in the United States.

Iran drew all three of its Group G matches – 2-2 against New Zealand, goalless against Belgium, and 1-1 with Egypt – to finish third in the standings and miss out on a place in the knockout stage of the expanded 48-team tournament.

"Mr. Qalenoeei will continue as Iran head coach. We have already received his plans for the Asian Cup, and preparations will begin during the upcoming FIFA international window in September," Taj told Iranian state television on Saturday.

A semifinalist at the previous two editions, Iran will



Iran head coach Amir Qalenoeei looks on during the warm-up before the FIFA World Cup Group G match against New Zealand in Los Angeles, California, U.S., June 15, 2026.
● DANIEL COLE/REUTERS

Qalenoeei to stay on as Iran coach for Asian Cup, Taj confirms

begin its bid for a fourth Asian Cup title – and its first since 1976 – against China in Group C, which also features Kyrgyzstan and Syria, at Riyadh's Kingdom Arena on January 9.

Never-ending debate

Debate continues among Iranian fans and pundits over Team Melli's World Cup campaign in the United States.

Iran produced some spirited performances and

completed the group stage unbeaten for the first time in its World Cup history, an achievement many considered noteworthy given the politically charged and disrupted buildup Qalenoeei's side endured amid

the country's conflict with one of the tournament's co-hosts.

All Iran-based players in the squad arrived at the tournament without competitive action after the outbreak of the war in late

February, while the national team had little opportunity to play high-profile warm-up matches before the World Cup.

Logistical problems – including travel restrictions, visa denials affecting support staff, and repeated trips back to the team's training base in Tijuana, Mexico, after each match – also complicated Iran's campaign, with Qalenoeei and several players publicly complaining about those conditions throughout the tournament.

Describing Iran as the "most oppressed" team at the World Cup, Qalenoeei urged FIFA after the Egypt match "not to let the hosts treat teams and players the same way in the future."

Captain Mahdi Taremi also labeled the tournament a logistical "disaster," saying Team Melli had not been made to feel welcome in the United States.

Despite those challenges, Qalenoeei has faced mounting criticism over his tactical approach and decision-making during the three group-stage matches. Critics argue he failed

to deliver on the team's stated objective of reaching the knockout rounds for the first time in seven World Cup appearances, despite what many observers viewed as a favorable group-stage draw.

Qalenoeei, who returned for a second spell as Iran head coach in March 2023, broke his silence on Wednesday with a lengthy social media post reflecting on the World Cup campaign. However, he stopped short of offering an apology for the team's elimination, prompting further criticism from those who accused him of refusing to take responsibility for the early exit.

The 2027 Asian Cup will be a fourth major tournament for Qalenoeei, whose current contract is due to expire on July 23, as Iran head coach. During his first spell in charge, Iran was knocked out by South Korea in the quarterfinals of the 2007 Asian Cup, while his second tenure has so far produced a semifinal finish at the 2024 edition, where Team Melli lost to host Qatar.

Iranian clubs forced to host Asian matches at neutral venues: Report

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The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) has instructed Iranian clubs competing in the 2026/27 continental competitions to stage their home matches at neutral venues, IRNA reported on Saturday. Esteghlal and Tractor will represent Iran in the AFC Champions League Elite next season, while Chadormalou is set to compete in the AFC Champions League Two.

The Asian football governing body cited "logistical challenges, travel-related issues, and security concerns for participants, including teams, match officials and competition delegates" arising from the military tensions in the region as the reasons for the decision.

The move has drawn objections from the three Persian Gulf Pro League clubs, each of which has submitted a formal appeal to the AFC, arguing that there is no jus-

tification for moving their home matches to neutral venues, according to IRNA. The draw for the 2026/27 AFC Champions League Elite and AFC Champions League Two is scheduled to take place in Kuala Lumpur on August 18. The Iranian top flight was declared null and void following the outbreak of war between Iran and a U.S.-Israeli coalition on February 28.

The cancellation forced the Football Federation

of the Islamic Republic of Iran (FFIRI) to nominate Esteghlal and Tractor—the top two teams in the standings before the league was called off—for the AFC Champions League Elite. Both clubs are guaranteed places in the 12-team West Zone league phase.

Chadormalou, meanwhile, defeated Golgozar and Persepolis in a three-team playoff tournament last month to secure its continental debut.



● FFIRI

Iran to send 150-member delegation to World Nomad Games

Sports Desk

Iran will send a unified national delegation of up to 150 members to the 2026 World Nomad Games in Kyrgyzstan, Sports and Youth Minister Ahmad Donyamali said during a coordination meeting with Iranian Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan Gholamhossein Yadegari.

The World Nomad Games, held every two years and dedicated to traditional ethnic sports practiced across Central Asia, have previously featured Iranian participation through separate federation entries. Donyamali said the upcoming edition will mark the first time Iran competes as a single, coordinated delegation.

According to the minister, the Iranian contingent is expected to include around 120 athletes and coaches, along with approximately 20 accompanying officials.

The sixth edition of the multi-sport event will kick off on August 31, with the closing ceremony sched-



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uled for September 6.

Donyamali said Iran intends to strengthen both the size and quality of its participation in order to increase its medal prospects.

"For the first time, we are sending the teams in a serious and integrated manner, both quantitatively and qualitatively, and we want to enhance the medal-winning capacity of our delegation," he said.

The minister added that Iran also aims to use the event to showcase its cultural heritage, with athletes set to wear traditional costumes representing the country's various

ethnic groups during the opening parade. Six zurkhaneh athletes will also take part in exhibition performances showcasing Iran's traditional ritual sport.

Donyamali also said contingency plans had been prepared in case Iran's airspace becomes unavailable amid the military tensions in the region.

"If air borders are closed, we must evaluate alternative transit routes from now and, if necessary, send the delegation overland through neighboring countries. Ashgabat in Turkmenistan is one possible route," he said. "Even if we are in the

midst of war, it is important for us that the team is dispatched because it demonstrates our strength, and we want to achieve the best possible result," Donyamali said. Ambassador Yadegari said about 100 countries and roughly 3,000 athletes are expected to participate in the 2026 Games. He added that the event has gained additional significance as it coincides with the fifth anniversary of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit process.

Yadegari said around 20 presidents and heads of state have been invited to the opening ceremony, which will coincide with Kyrgyzstan's National Day. Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian is among the invited leaders, and an SCO summit meeting is also expected to be held alongside the Games. Donyamali noted that each participating country has been granted permission to introduce and demonstrate selected traditional sports during the competition.

Beach Volleyball U18 World Championships: Iran exits after injury-forced retirement in knockouts

Sports Desk

Iran's campaign at the FIVB Beach Volleyball U18 World Championships came to a premature end on Saturday after an injury forced the national team to retire from its first knockout-round match against Colombia in The Hague, Netherlands. Having finished third in Pool A to qualify for the round of 24, the Iranian

duo of Amin Vakili and Amirreza Jamshidi lost the opening set 21-19 and was trailing 16-7 in the second when Jamshidi was forced to retire through injury. The Iranian player had already required treatment during the first set and briefly returned to the court. However, he was unable to continue midway through the second set, with Colombia awarded the victory under tournament regulations.

The Iranian pair opened its campaign with a 2-1 (21-16, 20-22, 15-6) victory over Canada's Bruno Azevedo and Cameron Gibson before suffering a straight-set defeat (21-14, 21-18) to hosts Sven van Groenestein and Kyan Bezemer. Iran then fell 2-1 (18-21, 21-19, 15-12) to Poland's Karol Lunio and Wojciech Witkowski to finish third in the group.



● FIVB