Iran coach Qalenoei blasts move to prevent team's flight to Basra

Sports Desk

Iran head coach Amir Qalenoei strongly criticized the decision to prevent the national team from flying directly from Tehran to Basra ahead of a four-nation friendly tournament in Iraq, saying his team would not have taken part in the competition had it known political considerations were behind the move.

The team's flight to Basra was scrapped only hours before its scheduled departure due to U.S.-imposed aviation sanctions on Iranian airlines, which went into effect in September. The decision forced the Iranian squad to fly from Tehran to Abadan before completing the journey to the Iraqi city by road.

Speaking at a press conference in Basra on Thursday, Qalenoei said the team had initially assumed security concerns were behind the decision, stressing that the safety of human lives was paramount. However, he said Iran would have reconsidered its participation had it known the decision was politically motivated.

"We thought the decision was due to security concerns because human life matters to us. But had we known political issues were involved – and we are still not sure whether they were – we would never have come to Basra, because the dignity of Iran and the Iranian people is more important to us than anything else," he said.

"We want the people of our country and those across the region, particularly in Iraq, to live together in strength and peace, away from war and other problems," he added.

"Many people say football is not political, but the treatment we received in the United States [during the World Cup] suggested otherwise," added Qalenoei, whose team's training base for June's global showpiece was moved to the Mexican city of Tijuana amid the military conflict involving Iran, the U.S. and Israel, despite the team's three group-stage matches being scheduled to take place on U.S. soil.



Iranian players take part in a training session in Basra, Iraq, on November 12, 2026.
FFIRI

"Iran is a powerful country with thousands of years of civilization and culture, and we hope the countries and people of the region can live alongside one another in peace and tranquility."

The Iranian coach also expressed gratitude to the Iraqi people for standing alongside Iran during difficult times, recalling the support extended by the Iranian people and government to Iraq in challenging circumstances.

Turning to football matters, Qalenoei said the tournament, which will see Iran take on Palestine on Saturday before facing Iraq three days later at Basra International Stadium, would provide a valuable opportunity to assess younger players and build a team for the future.

The tournament was originally intended to form part of Iran's preparations for next January's AFC Asian Cup in Saudi Arabia, before the flagship continental event was postponed by 11 months due to security concerns following an escalation in the conflict involving Saudi Arabia and Yemen's Ansarullah.

Growing scrutiny of Iran's aging squad, which was the second-oldest at the World Cup, in recent months has prompted Qalenoei to inject fresh blood into the national team, with Al Wasl striker Mahdi Taremi and Tractor goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand among the high-profile absentees from the revamped 29-man squad for the November international break.

"We have made several changes to the squad and tried to give more opportunities to younger players. Asian football is progressing, with considerable investment being made, and some countries are even granting citizenship to foreign players to represent them," he said.

He also praised Iran's tournament opponents, particularly Palestine, describing them as a strong side with several players competing abroad.

Qalenoei also underlined the similarities between Iranian and Iraqi football, saying: "Having worked with Iraqi players such as Emad Mohammed Ridha and Karrar Jassim, I can say Iranian and Iraqi players share similar characteristics. They are physically strong and technically gifted."

Asked whether Basra could serve as a future venue for Iran's home matches, Qalenoei said the decision rested with the Iranian Football Federation and clubs.

Iran have not played a home international match on their own soil for around 500 days, he noted, adding that his experience in Basra had been a positive one.

"Hopefully, the war will end soon, because health and peace are the most beautiful things in the world. But if one day we are unable to play in Iran, we could choose Basra, because we have not felt like strangers here since the moment we arrived," Qalenoei said.

Dakar 2026 Youth Olympics:

Soltanian breaks gold drought as Iran finishes with eight medals

Sports Desk

Benyamin Soltanian ended Iran's gold drought at the Dakar 2026 Youth Olympics by claiming the top prize in the men's +73kg taekwondo event on Thursday.

Having beaten opponents from Bulgaria and South Korea without dropping a single round, the young Iranian capped his dominant campaign with a 2-0 (15-8, 4-4) victory over Spain's Iván Lysenko in the final, taking the country's medal haul to eight, including four silvers and three bronzes.

His triumph also completed Iran's two-medal haul in taekwondo after Asal Goltappeh settled for silver in the women's 63kg category following a defeat to Germany's Luna Fellinger in the final on Wednesday at the Complexe Iba Mar Diop.

Elsewhere on the final day of Iranian action at the multi-sport event, the country claimed an impressive bronze medal in women's futsal.

Tannaz Baqeri scored a hat-trick as the Iranian girls, having suffered a 3-2 extra-time defeat to Venezuela in the semifinals, bounced back from a 2-1 halftime deficit to beat Italy 5-2 in the third-place match. It was Iran's second victory over the European side, following a 3-1 win on the final day of the group stage.

The first of Iran's four silver medals came in swimming, where Parsa Shahshahani clocked 2:02.74 to finish runner-up to New Zealand's Ariel Muchirahondo in the men's 200m backstroke final.

Iranian judoka Sobhan Hakimi also claimed silver in the men's -81kg category. A gold medalist at July's Asian Cadet Judo Championships, Hakimi opened his campaign with a victory over Sierra Leone's Shaku Kargbo, followed by a semifinal win against Egypt's Aly Ealramly, before being denied gold by Slovenia's Maks Cebulj in the final.

In beach wrestling, meanwhile, Iran's Amirali Domirkolaei suffered a 4-0 defeat to Venezuela's Wilfredo Grabiel Rodriguez Gonzalez in the men's 60kg final.

Iran also collected a beach wrestling bronze through Reza Jalalian in the men's 80kg class, while Arash Pahali won bronze in men's wushu, finishing third in the changquan combined event in taolu.

The medal haul in the Senegalese capital marked Iran's lowest tally in the four editions of the Youth Olympics since the event was first introduced at Singapore 2010. The country was represented by 29 athletes across two team events and 12 individual sports.

At Singapore 2010, Iran secured two gold, two silver and one bronze medal. The country collected three gold and three bronze medals at Nanjing 2014 before achieving its best performance to date with seven gold, three silver and four bronze medals at Buenos Aires 2018.



taekwondo.ir



WTT

WTT Contender Istanbul 2026:

Rahimi's historic run ends in last 32

Sports Desk

Iranian table tennis player Elina Rahimi's historic campaign at the WTT Contender Istanbul 2026 came to an end in the round of 32 after she suffered a 3-1 (11-6, 6-11, 11-9, 11-8) defeat to second seed and world No. 17 Joo Cheonhui of South Korea on Thursday.

Rahimi became the first Iranian woman to reach the main draw of a WTT Contender event after battling through three rounds of qualifying at the tournament in Istanbul.

Her achievement was particularly significant as she became only the second Iranian woman to reach the main draw of a WTT Series event, following Neda Shahsavari, who made the last 32 through qualifying at the WTT Star Contender Doha II in 2021.

Ranked No. 650 in the world, Rahimi was the fourth-lowest-ranked player in the women's singles qualifying draw. She beat world No. 691 Katarina Strazar of Slovenia in the first round (11-7, 5-11, 11-7, 11-6) before pulling off an impressive straight-games victory over Swedish sixth seed and world No. 122 Filippa Bergand (11-6, 11-9, 11-6).

The 21-year-old then sealed her place in the main draw with a victory over Russia's Valeriia Kotsiur (11-6, 11-7, 7-11, 5-11, 11-5).

The official World Table Tennis website hailed Rahimi's achievement in Istanbul, describing it as "a landmark moment for Iranian table tennis."