Iran needs tougher tests, Qalenoei insists after Palestine win

Sports Desk

Iran head coach Amir Qalenoei said the country's young internationals need to be tested against top-level teams in friendly matches to develop the experience required for the major tournaments ahead.

Qalenoei made the remarks after Team Melli defeated Palestine 2-0 in the first of its two matches at a four-team friendly tournament in Basra, Iraq, on Saturday.

Iran enjoyed the lion's share of possession and created several clear-cut chances but still had to wait until the 77th minute to break the deadlock against the world No. 92 side, which had been reduced to 10 men in the 65th minute following a second booking for midfielder Ameed Sawafta.

Sardar Azmoun volleyed home Hossein Goodarzi's cross into the bottom corner.

Iran's second goal was a replica of the opener, as Goodarzi, making his international debut, found his Esteghlal teammate Saleh Hardani in the box before the latter's sliding volley sealed the victory with six minutes remaining.

"It was a very good game. Palestine had enjoyed a decent run of results in its previous 10 matches, suffering only one defeat. They are a very good, well-organized team with a good goalkeeper, who could even have been named the man of the match.

"We could have scored at least twice in the first half and early in the second, but the Palestine goalkeeper made some excellent saves," the Iranian coach said.

Against the backdrop of criticism he has faced in recent years over his aging squad – the second-oldest at June's FIFA World Cup – Qalenoei has injected fresh blood into the roster for the Basra tournament, with Al Wasl striker Mahdi Taremi and Tractor center-back Shoja Khalilzadeh among the high-profile absentees during the November international break.

"During this international window, we decided to give young players more playing time, and I think they passed the test. However, a team like Iran, which wants to give more opportunities to its youngsters, needs to play against stronger opponents," Qalenoei said.



Iranian striker Dennis Eckert (24) is seen in action against Palestine during a friendly match in Basra, Iraq, on November 14, 2026.
MOHSEN DAVOUDI/FFIRI

Qalenoei and his new-look team will face a more formidable test next when they take on familiar foe Iraq in the tournament on Tuesday.

"The match against Iraq will provide us with a good opportunity to give young players a chance to perform in front of a large crowd and under difficult circumstances," he said.

Qalenoei also explained the significant changes to Iran's starting lineup compared to the previous international window in September, when Team Melli suffered back-to-back defeats against Uzbekistan and Russia.

"These matches are about giving younger players opportunities, so the result comes second. The result matters, of course, but we must use this opportunity to usher in a new generation of players for the national team," he said.

Asked about the decision to field debutant goalkeepers Mohammad Khalifeh and Habib Farabbasi against Palestine, he said: "It was part of the many changes we made for this match. Our two goalkeepers made their international debuts and performed well. With two matches ahead of us, we wanted to give both of them an opportunity.

"The teams taking part in the Basra tournament are good sides. We want to face greater pressure in our matches and, as will be the case against Iraq, play in front of large crowds.

"Every team needs to face top-level opposition to see how its young players respond. We played Belgium and Egypt at the World Cup, and before the Asian Cup, we also need to take on major opponents in front of 70,000 to 80,000 spectators."

The Iranian coach recalled Iraq's friendly against Spain ahead of a previous World Cup, saying his team needed similar tests.

"I remember Iraq played Spain before the World Cup. We need matches like that, too. The national team should be a blend of experience and youth.

The Basra tournament was intended to form part of Iran's preparations for next January's AFC Asian Cup in Saudi Arabia, before the flagship continental competition was postponed by 11 months due to security concerns in the region.

"Before heading into the Asian Cup, we need to play high-profile matches to assess our players' capabilities in terms of tactical understanding. Our team is in good shape, and I believe we can be among the teams that perform better than they did in the previous edition."

FIP Junior Asia Padel Cup 2026:

Iran rallies past Kuwait to win boys' crown

Sports Desk

Iran came from behind to defeat Kuwait in the final and secure the boys' title at the FIP Junior Asia Padel Cup 2026 in Jakarta, Indonesia, on Saturday.

The victory capped a successful campaign for the country, following the Iranian girls' team's victory over Australia to claim the bronze medal earlier in the day.

Iran got off to a shaky start in the boys' final as Parsa Zolfaqari and Alireza Haj-Mollaheydari suffered a 2-0 (6-1, 6-2) defeat to Kuwait's Abdulrahman Bineedan and Ziad Tifouni in the under-14 contest.

Amir-Taha Dehqani and Ramtin Rafei drew Iran level after bouncing back from a first-set defeat in a tie-break to win the next two sets 6-3, 6-4 against Yaqoub Zainal and Sayed Hashem Almazeedi in the under-16 showdown, forcing the final into an under-18 decider.

Iran head coach Arsalan Mohammadi fielded Alireza Taqizadeh and Mehrad Mansouri for the decisive match, and the duo delivered by beating Ali Reda and Sulaiman Qabazard in straight sets (6-3, 6-4) to clinch the title.

In the women's bronze-medal match, Yasamin Hassani and Armita Ezzatnejad gave Iran an early advantage by thrashing the Australian pair of Evelyn Daisy Ferguson and Frankie Avalon Smith 2-0 (6-0, 6-1) in the under-14 contest.

Iran coach Sahabeh Fard then fielded Romina Rafei and Bahar Haj-Mollaheydar for the second doubles match, with the duo also winning in straight sets (6-2, 6-1) against Ava Garner and Hope Johns as Iran bounced back from its semifinal defeat to Indonesia in style.

Also featuring Jana Safi, Delan Bitarafan, Helia Aqili, Nila Rahimi and Arghavan Amirkhanlou, the Iranian team opened its campaign with a victory over Australia before defeating the Philippines 3-0 to reach the semifinals.



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World Para Taekwondo Championships 2026:

Haqshenas ruled out injured as Iran returns to global showpiece



MNA

Sports Desk

The Iranian squad left Tehran on Sunday to take part in the upcoming World Para Taekwondo Championships in Muju, South Korea.

The 11th edition of the global showpiece will kick off on Friday, with more than 400 athletes from around the world vying for glory at the iconic Muju Taekwondowon venue.

The Iranian men's team will be without 2024 Paralympic bronze medalist Hamed Haqshenas, who has been ruled out with a knee injury.

The squad will still feature several medal hopefuls, including Alireza Bakht – also a Paralympic bronze medalist who will look to build on his gold-winning campaign in the -80kg class at last month's Aichi-Nagoya Asian Para Games – as well as Amir-Mohammad Haqiqatshenas, Amirhossein Alizadeh and Mohammad-Taha Hassanpour.

In the women's competition, Iran will be represented by Aylar Jami, Zahra Rahimi and Maryam Abdollahpour.

Haqiqatshenas and Jami will also enter the World Championships on the back of their Asian Para Games titles, while Rahimi settled for silver at the multi-sport event.

Iran men's head coach Mahdi Ahmadi highlighted the importance of the Muju event, which offers 140 ranking points and could play a significant role in the athletes' bids to qualify for the Los Angeles 2028 Paralympic Games.

"Winning gold medals in South Korea will be difficult, and predicting how many of our athletes can reach the top of the podium is not easy," he said.

The Iranian coach also pointed to the country's four-year absence from the World Championships, saying the lack of participation had left Iran trailing its international rivals.

"For four years, we have been unable to take part in the World Championships for various reasons, and this has caused us to fall behind our international opponents," he added.

Iran will travel directly from South Korea to Kazakhstan to compete in the WT Grand Prix Final, which gets underway in Astana on November 28, with Ahmadi warning that the tight turnaround could take its toll on the athletes.

"The short gap between the two competitions and the fatigue from travelling will undoubtedly affect the athletes' technical performance and could increase the risk of injuries," he said.

Ahmadi concluded that Iran would be looking to collect a combined 240 ranking points from the two tournaments to strengthen its chances of securing places at the Los Angeles 2028 Paralympics.