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Iran's Soccer Team – A Team for All Iranians



*Iranian players celebrate qualifying for the 2022 World Cup.
Photo Credit: Al Jazeera*

Henry McCabe
The America-Eurasia Center
Middle East Program
www.EurasiaCenter.org

The America-Eurasia Business Coalition
www.usebc.org

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Iranian players celebrate qualifying for the 2022 World Cup.

Photo Credit: Al Jazeera

Sports and politics are inherently intertwined despite many attempts to separate them. Perhaps no sporting events are more political than international soccer where teams from diametrically opposed nations compete against each other in the “world’s game”. As the 2022 World Cup in Qatar approaches this November, Iran will find itself in one of the most politically charged matches in recent history as they play the United States. However, this will not be the first time that these two teams play, and Iran’s national team has a long history of political controversy, both domestic and international. The team also attempts to overcome politics and celebrate the aspects of sport that unite nations and the world.

Pre-Revolution: Asian Dominance



The Iranian national team in the early 1970s.

Photo credit: AFC

The Iranian national team, or Team Melli (meaning “the national team” in Persian), played its first international match in 1940, a 0-0 draw against Afghanistan. It would be another 28 years before the team truly burst onto the soccer scene in Asia as the continent’s premier team, as they won the 1968 AFC Asian Cup hosted in Iran. This competition was not without controversy, however. A rumor abounded that Haqib Ilqanian, a Jewish industrialist, had purchased 16,000 tickets to distribute to Jewish Iranians so that they might root for Israel against Iran when they played. Anti-Semitic chants were heard during the match between Israel and Iran, and for many Iranians, the match did not just represent a sporting contest between nations, but also a religious one between Muslims and Jews. Indeed, even under the Shah, soccer was heavily politicized, and the ruling family took a direct role in the sport as it was used to promote nationalism.

Iran followed up their 1968 home success with another win in 1972, lifting the cup once again, this time in Bangkok after defeating South Korea. The AFC Asian Cup remained in Iranian hands in 1976, as Team Melli won their third and most recent (as of 2022) Asian Cup, this time against Kuwait in front of 100,000 Iranian fans at Azadi Stadium in Tehran.



The Iranian National team at the 1978 World Cup.

Photo Credit: Iran Visitor

With a decade of Asian domination solidifying their position in the international soccer arena, Team Melli's next goal was to establish themselves as a global soccer powerhouse by qualifying for the 1978 World Cup in Argentina. They did this with ease, topping a second round qualifying group which included Hong Kong, South Korea, 1976 AFC Asian Cup runners up Kuwait, and Australia. However, while Iran dominated Asian soccer for a decade, their first taste of global competition would end in disappointment as losses against the Netherlands, Peru, and a draw against Scotland meant they failed to advance past the group stage in Argentina. Nevertheless, Iran dominated the Asian soccer landscape in the decade before the 1978-9 Revolution in a manner that few teams in Asia, let alone the world, have come close to.

Post-Revolution: A Lost Decade

The 1980s would be a lost decade for Iran's national team as they did not qualify for any World Cups due to the tumult of the Revolution and the brutal Iran-Iraq War which forced them to play their matches in a neutral stadium, which was unacceptable to the Iranians. Matches were played in the 1980s as Iran continued to compete in the AFC Asian Cup, although with significantly less success than in the previous decade. Iraq's invasion of Iran began during the 1980 Asian Cup as Iran lost 2-1, setting the sporting tone for the next decade. Coinciding with their lack of sporting success, soccer in Iran felt the effects of the new Islamic regime. State authorities looked down on the sport because they associated it with the accumulation of money and the promotion of violence, both in cities and in stadiums. Additionally, what was once a spectator sport for all Iranians became one exclusively for men as women were banned from attending matches in 1981 because of the presence of "half-naked men" and "profanity." The team was also targeted by some Iranians who criticized expenditure on sports. While Iran had played matches under the authoritarian regime of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the team was able to bring joy to all Iranians through its success on the field. With the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, the dark decade for Team Melli reflected a lost decade for Iranian society.

Revival: A Return to the World Stage.



Member of the 1996 Iranian Asian Cup squad and all-time top Iranian scorer Ali Daei.

Photo Credit: The Sun.

The late 1980s would see a rejuvenation for the sport in Iran. Soccer was the most popular sport in the country, regardless of attempts by the regime to reduce its popularity. Realizing this, the regime began to accept soccer as the favored sport of Iranians and slowly grew to support it. In 1988, just months after the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Iran and Iraq played a match in Kuwait to demonstrate that hostilities were finally over. It also seemed as though Iran's ban on women attending matches would end, as five hundred women were permitted to attend a match between India and Bahrain during the preliminary rounds of the 1994 Asian Youth Cup, however the decision was reversed just three days later, and women continue to be banned from attending matches despite frequent protests from activists that have worked tirelessly to gain women the equal right to support Team Melli.

The national team began to recover from the failures of the previous decade due, at least partially, to increased support from the state. The turnaround began with the 1990 Asian Games held in Beijing where Team Melli took home the gold medal, bringing success despite missing the 1990 World Cup. However political interference that would force star player Ali Parvin to resign from the national team in 1994 dampened the celebrations, as he was a popular athlete from before the Revolution, a fact resented by conservative hardliners within the Iranian football federation.

Qualification proved elusive once more for the 1994 World Cup in the United States, postponing a potentially politically charged matchup against the United States on American soil until 2026 at the earliest. However, failing to qualify for two World Cups did not mean that the Iranians were stagnant, as many players that would feature for the national team at the 1996 Asian Cup and the 1998 World Cup began their careers during the early 1990s.

Indeed, the 1996 Asian Cup, which saw the Iranians finish third proved to be a precursor to success in 1998 at the World Cup in France. Their third-place finish included an impressive trouncing of South Korea by a score of 6-2, only to be defeated by geopolitical and sporting rivals Saudi Arabia in the semifinals.



Iran Qualifies for the 1998 World Cup.

Photo Credit: Street Football World.

Qualification for their first World Cup since 1978 would be rocky, and the political machinations that forced Ali Parvin out of the team foreshadowed what was to come in 1997. Iran's manager at the time, Mayili-Kuhan, a conservative, refused to call upon several star players who played in the Bundesliga, Germany's topflight league and one of the most prestigious in the world. As a result, Iran closed out qualifying for the 1998 World Cup with a string of poor performances, including an embarrassing defeat to Qatar that put Team Melli at risk of missing the World Cup. After parliamentary discussions, Kuhan was sacked, and was replaced by Valdeir Vieira, head coach of the Iranian Olympic team. Vieira would successfully guide Iran to victory against Australia over the course of two matches which saw the Socceroos and Team Melli tie 3-3, with the Iranians advancing on away goals. With their victory, Iran became the final team to qualify for the World Cup.

Qualification for the 1998 World Cup occurred shortly after the reformer Mohammed Khatami was elected president with the endorsement of many prominent soccer players. After defeating Australia, women in Tehran celebrated victory by removing their veils and joining men in raucous celebration. 5,000 women would later storm the Azadi Stadium, protesting their ban from Iranian stadiums. Indeed, many Iranians had become frustrated at the lack of political change following the election of the reformer Khatami and used the celebrations surrounding qualification as an opportunity to vent frustration. People openly drank alcohol and the celebrations at the Azadi Stadium brought men and women together, breaking post-revolutionary taboos. Feminists

recognized the opportunity and pushed for woman to have the same opportunity to attend matches at men.

World Cup '98



*American and Iranian national teams make a gesture of goodwill before their 1998 World Cup match.
Photo Credit: Chai and Conversation.*

While failure to qualify for the 1994 World Cup meant Team Melli would not have to face the United States on American soil, qualification in 1998 set up a matchup in the group stages between the two geopolitical rivals. However, before that could happen, political issues again struck Team Melli's manager, as Vieira was fired in January 1998, to be replaced by Croatian Tomislav Ivic, only for Ivic to be fired under pressure from conservatives and replaced by an Iranian, Jalal Talebi.

The match against the United States was dubbed "the most politically charged game in World Cup history," and the president of the American soccer federation called it "the mother of all games" but in reality, it would go off without a hitch. In the spirit of reconciliation, the Iranian players presented the Americans with white roses, a peace symbol in Iran, while the American players presented the Iranians with pins. President Bill Clinton sent a message expressing hopes that the match could begin to repair ties between the quarreling countries. While there may have been political motivations to portray Iran in the best light possible, on an individual basis, seeing

Iranians and Americans on the same field, not just competing, but with their arms around one another was a powerful symbol. Legendary American defender Jeff Agoos remarked that the Americans and Iranians “did more in 90 minutes than the politicians did in 20 years.”

This isn't to say that there was no drama. Iran was designated Team B in the match, while the United States was designated Team A. According to FIFA regulations, Team B should approach Team A for pre-match handshakes, but Iranian Supreme Leader Khameni forbade this, and it had to be negotiated that the Americans would approach the Iranians. Emotions also ran high for some members of both teams. American manager Steve Sampson said that he had been instructed not to politicize the game by the US soccer federation and FIFA, although later interviews made clear that he did not come at the game emotionless, as he would later say that he was thinking about the 1979 Hostage Crisis. He also accused the Iranian government of making the match political.

Additionally, while American midfielder Tab Ramos said that the match was undoubtedly more important for the Iranians than the Americans, the American players could not ignore the tensions leading up to it, as the players and their families were assigned a security detail to ward off any threats. Iranian striker Khodadad Azizi also brought charged emotions to the match declaring that Iran would win the match for the sake of the Iranians who had died in the Iran-Iraq War.

Iranian head coach Jalal Talebi came at the match from a different perspective. A senior international for Iran before the Revolution, Talebi moved to the United States and started a new life in California. The call to return and coach the national team ahead of such a politically charged match put Talebi in a difficult spot between the country of his birth and the country that gave him a new life. For Talebi, that simple pre-match photo meant so much more as it showed that on an individual level, Americans and Iranians are not enemies.



Iranian fans at the 1998 World Cup.

Photo Credit: Four Two.

The game would prove to be intense as Iran eked out a 2-1 victory, winning their first World Cup match and eliminating the United States. While this would be Iran's only win at the 1998 World Cup, an uninitiated observer would be forgiven for thinking they won the World Cup. The victory was celebrated without any sort of anti-American character, and instead was purely hailed as an expression of pride in Iran's success. The joyous celebrations defied the reserved, stifled conservative environment that the regime preferred. Victory over the United States rekindled the emotions that had exploded after defeating Australia which was extremely unnerving to the regime.

While Supreme Leader Khameni predictably politicized the victory by likening Team Melli's victory to "revolution and the war against Iraq," President Clinton congratulated the Iranians. While it is clear this 1998 match did not have any impact on diplomatic relations, the impact on regular Iranians was far reaching. For many Iranians, the World Cup provided an escape from Iran's international isolation. Iranian players moved to play in foreign leagues, moves facilitated by the long-rooted diaspora in countries like Germany. All types of Iranians, secular and religious, domestic and diaspora, were united in support of Team Melli.

The World Cup match would also be parlayed into more sports diplomacy, as the United States and Iran played to a 1-1 draw in a 1999 friendly in Pasadena, California, something only possible as a result of the successful personal co-operation that took place in 1998.

The 21st Century: New Expectations and Controversy



Iranian national team manager Carlos Querioz

Photo Credit: Yahoo Sports

That singular victory in 1998 provided Iran with new expectations about what the national team could accomplish. However, their success in 1998 would not be built upon for the 2002 World Cup as the team was eliminated in the playoff qualifications by the Republic of Ireland, losing 2-1 on aggregate. Just as '98 brought celebrations, defeat in 2002 brought protest. Frustration over the lack of reform in Iran combined with Team Melli's dismal performance and rumors that they had been told to lose on purpose by the government to prevent celebrations like the ones in 1998 proved to be the perfect recipe for chaos. Protests turned into riots, resulting in the arrests of hundreds of young Iranians and the destruction of buildings.

Iran's success since then has proven to be more sustained. Iran was one of the first two teams to qualify for the 2006 World Cup, and while they once more missed the World Cup in 2010, they have proceeded to qualify for the last three World Cups, including of course, the upcoming Qatar World Cup. Iran's current FIFA ranking of 20 marks Team Melli as Asia's premier team. However,

the upward trajectory of the team seemed at risk in 2006 as FIFA temporarily suspended the national team for government interference, although they were quickly reinstated. FIFA was not necessarily wrong to scrutinize government interference, as Team Melli's success occurred despite continued government meddling.



Members of the Iranian national team wear green arm and wrist bands in support of Mir Hossein Mousavi

Photo Credit: The Telegraph

In one episode of such meddling and amidst calls for a new election following accusations that the 2009 election was stolen in favor of incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; six members of the national team wore green arm and wrist bands during a game in South Korea that was being broadcast on Iranian state television. Four players removed the green bands, the color associated with opposition leader and reformer Mir Hossein Mousavi, at half-time, but captain Mehdi Mahdavi continued to wear the green captain's armband for the duration of the game. Iranian state media later reported that four of the players had "retired" following their public demonstration. Ahmadinejad was known for his close interest in soccer, and it was reportedly on his orders that head coach Ali Daei had been sacked previously. Daei's successor, Iranian American Afshin Ghotbi later responded to the controversy by saying that the government and Iranian football federation had not taken a stance on the issue. Regardless of whether the players

were suspended or not, this incident demonstrated the extent that politics and sport are constantly intertwined.

The official state position on Israel also proved problematic for national team players, as Masoud Shojaei and Ehsan Haji Safi both received lifetime bans, which were later rescinded, for playing a Europa league match against Israeli side Maccabi Tel Aviv.

Indeed, it has been a common occurrence for the geopolitical stances of the regime to result in problems for the national team. Earlier this year, the Canadian soccer federation promised a \$400,000 appearance fee for the Iranian national team to play a friendly in Vancouver. This came just two years after the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, a recognized terror organization in both the United States and Canada, shot down Flight PS752 after it took off in Tehran, killing 55 Canadian citizens and 30 permanent residents. Vancouver's Mayor Kennedy Stewart and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau denounced the game. Eventually pressure from the government and families of victims forced the Canadian federation to cancel the game due to "the untenable geopolitical situation of hosting Iran."

World Cup 2022



The Iranian covers the crest on their uniform in protest of the killing of Masha Amini.

Photo Credit: Le Monde

More recently, amidst large scale protests in Iran against the killing of 22-year-old Masha Amini by Iran's morality police, some have begun to call for Iran to be banned from playing in the World Cup. These calls have come from a variety of sources, including Ukraine who have criticized Iran's treatment of its own citizens and its support for Russia.

The actions of the regime are reprehensible, and there is precedent for banning problematic nations from competition, with Russia's suspension from Olympic competition being a prominent recent example. Team Melli is no stranger to political controversy. However, banning Iran from the World Cup would be a mistake. FIFA has little regard for human rights, as evidenced by the 2018 World Cup being held in Russia and the 2022 competition being awarded to Qatar. FIFA only acted against Russia when it became politically expedient, and their ban on FIFA competitions has predictably had no effect on the War in Ukraine.

Banning Iran from the World Cup would be another statement that may make much of the world feel good but would do little to aid the ongoing protest movement.

Instead, the World Cup should be seen as an opportunity for Team Melli to make a statement of support for Masha Amini and the many brave protestors who risk their lives opposing Iran's violent and repressive regime.

Already the players have protested Amini's killing, wearing black jackets to cover up the Iranian emblem on their jerseys before a match against Senegal. In a social media post, star player and member of this year's World Cup squad Sardar Azmoun wrote that his "heart really broke for Masha Amini and the likes of Masha Amini who are innocent of this" while also acknowledging that he may be dismissed from the national team, but that it was worth it to stand up for the protesters. Azmoun and his teammates, the most famous athletes in a soccer-crazed country, should use the platform that the World Cup affords to make a statement on a global stage, a statement that will be seen by every Iranian.

A unified demonstration in support of the protest before Iran's match against the United States for example, would be a powerful symbol. The player could demonstrate that they play for the Iranian people and not the regime. Team Melli brings Iranians together, both pro and anti-regime, domestic and diaspora. While the government attempts to impose its twisted sense of morality on the public by continuing to ban women from stadiums and broadcasting of games in public areas to avoid the intermingling of men and women, once Team Melli takes the field, Iranians are united.

FIFA and the world should not get in the way of that.

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