



Abolfazl Alaei (30) of Iran's Esteghlal Khuzestan celebrates his late winner with his teammates in his side's 1-0 victory over Saudi Arabia's Al Fateh in their Tuesday match at Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Muscat, Oman.

## Alaei late header prolongs Al Fateh's Asian victory drought

Abolfazl Alaei's 80th minute header ensured Iranian champion Esteghlal Khuzestan took all three points in the 2017 AFC Champions League opener after its 1-0 Group B win over Saudi Arabia's Al Fateh on Tuesday at Sultan Qaboos Sports

Complex. The continental debutant from Ahvaz, Khuzestan province, was on top for much of the tie but could not find the breakthrough until 10 minutes from time when defender Alaei rose highest to nod home Peyman Shirzadi's inswinging corner at the

back post, the-afc.com reported. Al Fateh, which is making its second appearance in the competition after 2014, sees its winless run in the AFC Champions League stretch to seven games after it failed to pick up a victory in its inaugural campaign.

## Omani, Emirati stadiums to host Iranian clubs' quest for first Asian points

### Sports Desk

Today, Iranian Persian Gulf Pro League clubs Persepolis and Zob Ahan Esfahan will search every nook and cranny of the famous Omani and Emirati stadiums in their quest for the first three points in their openers in AFC Champions League.

heartbreak in the 2016 final.

The Garden City club has suffered from inconsistent domestic form, losing to Al Jazira and Dibba in recent times, but it did defeat Al Shabab in its most recent UAE Pro League outing last Thursday. And current AFC Player of the Year Omar Abdulrahman is a playmaker who can change a match in

The Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Muscat is about to see a clash of Asian giants today as Persepolis faces Al Hilal in what looks to be one of the standout ties of Matchday One.

Persepolis lost out on the 2015-16 Persian Gulf Pro League on goal difference to Esteghlal Khuzestan, but its second-place finish ensured a return to



Zob Ahan Esfahan takes on Al Ain of the UAE Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium in Abu Dhabi in Group C and Tehran powerhouse Persepolis plays against Saudi heavyweight Al Hilal in Group D, the-afc.com reported.

Against Zob Ahan Esfahan, the inaugural AFC Champions League winner Al Ain begins the first steps to redemption, as, last November, it failed to add to its 2003 crown when it suffered

an instant.

Former AFC Champions League runner-up Zob Ahan Esfahan, meanwhile, is well-placed in the Iranian league in fourth spot, but has hit a patch of poor form picking up just a point from its last four games. The 2010 finalist was eliminated by Al Ain in last year's Round of 16 and the Iranian side is keen to avenge that 3-1 aggregate defeat.

the continental stage after missing out last year.

Two-time Asian champion Al Hilal does hold the psychological edge over Persepolis as far as the form book is concerned having won two and drawn one of their four previous AFC Champions League encounters. The Riyadh club also eliminated Persepolis in the Round of 16 two years ago in a 3-1 aggregate win.

## Guardiola's Man City faces Monaco moment of truth

A hotly anticipated staging post in Manchester City's Pep Guardiola era arrives on today when Monaco visits the Etihad Stadium in the first leg of the Champions League last 16.

Guardiola was appointed to take City to the next level on the European stage and he has already masterminded a stirring 3-1 win over his former club Barcelona in the group phase, AFP reported.

But Monaco has been rampant this season, powering to the Ligue 1 summit with a tally of 76 goals that is unsurpassed in Europe's five major leagues, and Guardiola is keenly aware of the danger it poses.

"My impression against PSG and from what I've seen is they're a really strong team," he said recently of Leonardo Jardim's side, puffing out his cheeks for effect.

"They score a lot of goals, they are physical. We have to go to the gym in the next days!"

diola's selection decisions continue to raise eyebrows.

Claudio Bravo, signed amid great fanfare to replace Joe Hart, has been axed after a string of weak displays, meaning Willy Caballero, City's nominal third-choice goalkeeper in August, is now the number one.

What City's defensive configuration will be against Monaco, meanwhile, is anyone's guess. A rotating cast of fullbacks has seen midfielder Ferdinandinho fill in on both flanks of the defense of late, while Aleksandar Kolarov continues to flit between left-back and center-back.

### Falcao return

Yaya Toure has been successfully reintegrated into mid-field alongside Kevin De Bruyne and David Silva, having previously been frozen out by Guardiola.

But the complicity that was developing between the front three of Raheem Sterling, Leroy Sane and Gabriel Jesus has been scuppered by the broken foot sustained by the latter.

Jesus's absence has allowed Sergio Agüero to reclaim his place up front, although he was unable to find a way past the Huddersfield Town defence in Saturday's 0-0 FA Cup fifth-round draw.

While uncertainty abounds regarding City's best XI, Jardim's Monaco team largely picks itself.

Joao Moutinho, a European champion with Portugal, cannot get into the team and 18-year-old sensation Kylian Mbappe, whose 11 goals this season include two hat-tricks, begins most games on the bench.

Both could start, however, if Jardim elects to ditch his habitual 4-4-2 formation in favour of a 4-3-3.

With Jemerson suspended, Andrea Raggi is expected to start at centre-back.

The trip to Manchester will have special significance for Radamel Falcao, who has rediscovered his shooting boots after two dismal years on loan with Manchester United and Chelsea.

"El Tigre", 31, no longer bites with the force of his Porto and Atletico Madrid days, but, aided by a customised playing schedule, he has scored 22 goals in just 28 games.

"I manage him differently to the others," says Jardim. "Because he's a top-level player. I said at the start of the season that I was sure he'd succeed. Quality is permanent."

City are favourites to progress, but as PSG's 4-0 evisceration of Barcelona last week showed, France's top clubs are no longer content to make up the numbers in the Champions League.

## Budapest has 'no chance' to host 2024 Olympic Games

Budapest stands "no chance" of hosting the 2024 Olympics, according to the bid's chief organizer after more than 260,000 signed a petition against it.

The petition, organized by political group Momentum Movement, may force a referendum, which Balazs Furjes said would be "too little, too late", BBC reported.

Los Angeles and Paris are the other bidding cities after Hamburg pulled out in 2015 followed by Rome a year later.

"This ship has sailed, it seems," Furjes told Infodado.

"Unity has gone up in the air, and lacking that, we stand no chance against Paris or Los Angeles," Furjes added.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) will elect the winner at a vote in Lima, Peru, in September 2017.

"Over a quarter-of-a-million signatures have come together so this money is spent on modern hospitals and well-equipped schools instead of on the Olympics," said Andras Fekete-Gyor, chairman of Momentum Movement.

Hungary is the only one of the 10 most successful medal-



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winning countries at the summer Olympics never to have hosted the event.

Furjes added, "The Hungarian Olympic family, the capital, Parliament, and the government have all made unified decisions."

"Now I see that cause ran aground, even though a 120-year-old Hungarian dream had a palpable chance of coming true."

## Federation: 20 foreign teams to pit lifters at Iran meet

The Islamic Republic of Iran Weightlifting Federation (IRIFW) said a total of 20 countries have already expressed their willingness to take part in the 2nd International Fajr Cup — weightlifting championship, which is scheduled to be held next month in southern Iran.

The IRIFW public relations department announced on Sunday that the contestants in the upcoming competition will be from Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Cameroon, England, Hungary, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya,

Nigeria, Pakistan, Romania, Serbia, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda, Yemen as well as Iran, Press TV reported.

Meanwhile, USA Weightlifting, which is the national governing body overseeing the sport of weightlifting in the United States, has voiced its readiness to participate in the event and even submitted its list of weightlifters and members of the technical team to the IRIFW. The request needs to be reviewed by Iranian Foreign Ministry

officials before final approval and visa issuance.

The second International Fajr Cup will begin in the southwestern Iranian city of Ahvaz, located approximately 830 kilometers southwest of the capital, Tehran, on March 9, and will finish on March 14, 2017.

Participants at the forthcoming International Fajr Cup will be in action in men's 85kg, 94kg, 105kg and over 105kg weight categories. The top three athletes will be awarded cash prizes.



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Guardiola and his assistant Mikel Arteta watched Monaco's game at Paris Saint-Germain last month, when a 92nd-minute equalizer from Bernardo Silva rescued a 1-1 draw.

Another Silva equalizer secured another 1-1 draw in Monaco's last outing, at Bastia on Friday, but in the main it has encountered scant resistance in the French top flight this season.

Monaco has averaged 2.92 goals per league game, scoring four or more on no fewer than 10 occasions, and has already prevailed on English soil, winning 2-1 at Tottenham Hotspur in the group stage.

Three successive wins have lifted City to second place in the Premier League table, eight points behind leader Chelsea, but it remains a work in progress.

It is just over a month since its scarring 4-0 defeat at Everton — its fifth defeat of the campaign — and Guar-