

## The Guardian: Top Iran footballer arrested at club training for 'spreading propaganda' - PDF

Detention of Voria Ghafouri, who is not part of World Cup squad, seen as warning to players in Qatar



Voria Ghafouri, pictured in 2020 in action in the Persian Gulf Pro League, had been outspoken in his defence of Iranian Kurds. Photograph: Milad Esmaeli/SPP/Rex/Shutterstock

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Iranian security forces on Thursday arrested one of the country's most famous footballers, accusing him of spreading propaganda against the Islamic republic and seeking to undermine the national [World Cup](#) team.

Voria Ghafouri, a former member of the national football team and once a captain of the Tehran club Esteghlal, has been outspoken in his defence of Iranian [Kurds](#), telling the government on social media to stop killing Kurdish people. He has previously been detained for criticising the former Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif.

Iran are due to play Wales on Friday. The Iranian team has [already been embroiled in controversy](#) after failing to sing the national anthem before its game against England, and Ghafouri's arrest is likely to be seen as a warning to the players not to repeat their protests.

He was detained after a training session with his club, Foolad Khuzestan, on charges of having "tarnished the reputation of the national team and spread propaganda against the state", the Fars new agency said.

Other agencies said he was being charged with "insulting and intending to destroy the national football team and speaking against the regime".

Ministers in recent days have accused Ghafouri of being a Kurdish separatist, but he replied that he would give his life for [Iran](#). Earlier this year, the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said: "Some people, who benefit from the country's peace and security, enjoying their jobs and their favourite sports, bite the hand that feeds them," a reference many thought was to Ghafouri.

The footballer, 35, was a member of Iran's 2018 World Cup squad, but was surprisingly not named in the final lineup for this year's World Cup in Qatar.

Originally from the Kurdish-populated city of Sanandaj in western Iran, Ghafouri had posted a photo on Instagram of himself in traditional Kurdish dress in the mountains of Kurdistan, but is a cult hero beyond Iran's north-west. Sanandaj endured some of the most violent crackdowns in the protests that followed the death in custody of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian Kurd, and Ghafouri had visited some of those injured in the protests in Mahabad.

In 2019, he distributed blue jerseys in honour of Sahar Khodayari, a woman who self-immolated after being sentenced to prison for attempting to watch an Esteghlal match at Azadi stadium. After another incident of violence against female football fans in 2021, Ghafouri wrote on Instagram: "As a soccer player, I've indeed become humiliated when I play in an era when our mothers and sisters are prohibited from entering stadiums."

Many fans suggested his career at Esteghlal, a championship winning team, was cut short in June as punishment for speaking out. Others argued that in his mid-30s, Ghafouri was too old for the Iranian top flight.

He recently tweeted: "Stop killing Kurdish people!!! Kurds are Iran itself ... Killing Kurds is equal to killing Iran. If you are indifferent to the killing of people, you are not an Iranian and you are not even a human being ... All tribes are from Iran. Do not kill people!!!"



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