

AFC Asian Cup: Iran to face Palestine, Hong Kong, UAE in Group C



● SOHEIL SAADATMANDI/FFIRI

Sports Desk

Iran was drawn against Palestine, Hong Kong, and the United Arab Emirates in Group C of the 2023 AFC Asian Cup in Qatar.

The draw for the continent's flagship international football event took place in Doha on Thursday, where the 24 teams were split into six groups.

The tournament was originally scheduled to be played in June and July this year but will kick off on January 12 next year after China withdrew from hosting due to the country's COVID-19 restrictions.

Three-time champion Iran will begin its quest for a first title in 47 years with a game against Palestine in Al Rayyan's Education City

Stadium on January 14. The two sides last met in a friendly in 2018, which finished 1-1.

Palestine will be playing in a third successive Asian Cup, hoping to progress beyond the group phase for the first time.

Amir Qalenoee's men will then take on Hong Kong at the Khalifa International Stadium on January 19 - in a repeat of the double header in the previous World Cup qualifiers, with Iran coming out on top on both occasions.

Hong Kong will make a return to the continental showdown after a 55-year absence in the finals.

Iran will be back in the Education City Stadium for the final round of the group fixtures to square off against

the UAE - runner-up on home soil in 1996 - on January 23.

Iran defeated the UAE by one goal twice en route to qualification for the 2022 World Cup.

The Emiratis hosted the Asian Cup in 2019, when their campaign finished with a 4-0 defeat against Qatar in the semifinals.

"We will play at the highest level of international football in Asia so we're not going to have an easy task out there," Qalenoee said after the draw, adding: "All the teams must have been very strong to qualify for the event and there won't be any such thing as easy opponents."

"We will take it game by game but we have to think of facing teams like South

Korea, Japan, and Australia in the latter stages. The Asian Cup has already begun for us and we should seize each and every second of the upcoming training camps to prepare well for the tournament," said Qalenoee, who replaced Portuguese Carlos Queiroz in March - back on Iran's bench 16 years after his team suffered a shootout defeat against South Korea in the Asian Cup quarterfinals.

Queiroz led Iran to the semifinals in 2019, where his men fell to a 3-0 loss to Japan.

Other groups

Queiroz will be taking part in the event for a third time in a row, this time with defending champion and host Qatar.

Qatar will open the competi-

tion against Lebanon in Al Khor's Al Bayt Stadium on January 12 in Group A - also featuring China and Tajikistan.

"We know exactly what is in front of us and what is next, but the next step is to think about ourselves, it doesn't matter which teams we are going to play," Queiroz said. "What is important is to be ready."

Australia, champion in 2015, is in Group B alongside Uzbekistan, Syria and India.

"Every draw is tough, but very happy with that draw," said Australia coach Graham Arnold, who took the Socceroos to the knockout rounds of the World Cup last year before bowing out to eventual champion Argentina in the last 16.

Alcaraz the man to beat on clay, says Djokovic

REUTERS - World number one Novak Djokovic said Carlos Alcaraz is the man to beat on clay and is one of the top title contenders for the French Open.

Alcaraz has won back-to-back claycourt titles in Barcelona and Madrid after beginning an injury-hit season with the Buenos Aires crown and is poised to leapfrog Djokovic into top spot in the rankings after the ongoing Italian Open. Rafa Nadal, a 14-time champion at Roland Garros, has been dealing with a hip injury he suffered at the Australian Open in January and fears are growing the Spaniard may miss the Paris Grand Slam. Djokovic, 35, told reporters in Rome that Alcaraz was worthy of the number one ranking.

"He's going to be number one after this tournament whatever happens. Deservedly so," he added. "He has been playing some very impressive tennis, a great level. He's the player to beat on this surface, no doubt."

"Obviously having the familiarity of playing here in Qatar will help us as well," said Arnold.

Japan - the most decorated team in the competition with four titles - will step into Group D fixtures against Iraq, Indonesia, and Vietnam on the back of an impressive World Cup run which saw the Blue Samurai beat Germany and Spain to win the group before falling to a shootout heartbreak against Croatia in the last 16.

Newly-appointed German manager Juergen Klinsmann will steer two-time winner South Korea and Tottenham striker Son Heung-min against Malaysia, Jordan and Bahrain in Group E.

"I spoke to a lot of my players, they are all over Europe, they play in the K-League, they play in China, they play in Japan and they're all very excited," said Klinsmann.

"We have a strong team. We look at ourselves in the mirror and say we're going to go to Qatar to win the tournament."

Group F will feature Saudi Arabia - also a three-time champion - Thailand, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Oman, which will have another ex-Iran manager on its bench in Croatian Branko Ivankovic.

"We will go into the tournament with high ambitions. Saudi Arabia are the favorites and they played well during the World Cup but we also played well against them twice in the World Cup qualifiers. Two teams will automatically make the next stage and that is our first goal," said the Croatian who led Iran to a third-spot finish in 2004.

Top two of each group plus four best third-place finishers will advance to the round of 16, with the finals showpiece set to be staged at the Al Bayt Stadium on February 10.



● AP

"Of course, it depends on if Nadal is going to play in the French Open or not. But Alcaraz is one of the top favourites without any dilemma."

Djokovic, who skipped the American hardcourt swing as he was unvaccinated for COVID-19, said he hoped to reignite his rivalry with U.S. Open champion Alcaraz with a potential final meeting on the cards in Rome.

"We faced each other only once last year in Madrid," said Djokovic, who lost that match in three sets. "If we get a chance to face each other here, it would be in the final. I think we would both love to play in the final."

The 22-times Grand Slam champion said he had overcome a right elbow problem that kept him out of Madrid.

"It's all good. There's always some things here and there that bother you at this level. It's normal," Djokovic said.

"When you're not 25 anymore, I guess you experience that a bit more than what used to be the case. It takes a bit more time to recover."

Nuggets into Western Conference finals; Celtics, 76ers head to Game 7

ASSOCIATED PRESS - Nikola Jokic scored 32 points in another triple-double, Jamal Murray added 26 and the Denver Nuggets advanced to the NBA Western Conference finals for the first time since 2020 by beating the short-handed Phoenix Suns 125-100 in Game 6 on Thursday night. Denver's series victory comes two seasons after the Nuggets were embarrassed in a second-round postseason sweep by the Suns. This time, it was the Suns getting blown out on their home floor to end the season for the second straight year.

The Nuggets will play in the conference finals for the first time since they lost to the Lakers in five games in the Florida bubble during

the COVID-19 pandemic. They have never reached the NBA Finals.

The top-seeded Nuggets used a 23-2 run during the latter part of the first quarter to take a 44-26 lead and never looked back. Kentavious Caldwell-Pope - averaging 9.5 points in the playoffs - scored 17 in the first quarter while Jokic added 14. Caldwell-Pope finished with 21 points. Jokic shot 13 of 18 from the field and added 12 assists and 10 rebounds.

The Suns were playing without injured starters Deandre Ayton and Chris Paul and were eliminated in a rout in the Western Conference semifinals at home for a second straight season. Ayton sustained a

rib contusion in Tuesday's Game 5 while Paul has been out the past four games with a strained left groin.

Celtics 95 76ers 86

Jayson Tatum missed his first six 3-pointers before he drilled two straight clutch ones late in the game that pushed the Celtics past Philadelphia to send the Eastern Conference semifinals back to Boston for Game 7.

The defending conference champs are in familiar territory. Boston trailed 3-2 last season in the second round against Milwaukee before it won Game 6 on the road and the clincher at home. Game 7 is Sunday.

Tatum, who averaged 30.1 points in the regular sea-



● MATT YORK/AP

son, never stopped shooting even as the misses kept coming. He missed 14 of his first 15 shots overall from the floor and his ineffectiveness was a key reason the Celtics couldn't hold a 16-point lead.

With a shot at their first

conference final since 2001 at stake, the Sixers slogged through the first half before Joel Embiid flashed his MVP form and rallied the Sixers to a fourth-quarter lead.

Tyrese Maxey hit two free throws with 5:25 left for an 83-81 edge.

And that was it for Philly. Tatum buried one 3 for the 84-83 lead and a second that made it 87-83 and put the Celtics in firm control of Game 6.

Embiid and Tyrese Maxey each scored 26 points for the 76ers.