

## FIFA World Cup 2026:

# Iran to play Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan in first qualifying group



● FFIRI

### Sports Desk

Iran will begin its quest for a fourth successive berth in the World Cup finals in Group E of the preliminary round in Asia – also featuring Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The draw for the continent's Preliminary Joint Qualification Round 2 for the FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027 took place in the AFC House in Kuala Lumpur on Thursday, where 36 teams were divided into nine groups.

Iran's campaign will kick off at home against either Hong Kong or Bhutan on November 16, before Amir Qaleno'i's side plays away to Uzbekistan five days later. The final day of the group fixtures will see Iran host Uzbekistan on June 11, 2024. The newly-expanded World Cup – set to be staged across the United States, Canada, and Mexico – will see 48 teams participate in the flagship event of the International football, with eight and a half slots on offer for the Asian Football

Confederation's member states. All nine group winners and three runners-up will advance to the third round of the Asian qualifiers, while sealing a place at the Asian Cup. The 18 teams will be split into three groups of six, competing in a home-and-away round-robin format from September 5 next year. The top two of each group will be rewarded with direct qualification for the World Cup while the third and fourth teams will be given a second chance in

the fourth round of the qualifiers, where the top team of each of the three-team groups will progress to the global showpiece. The two second-placed sides in the fourth round will go head-to-head in a two-legged tie in November 2025 to decide who will head into the inter-confederation playoffs.

### Saudi task

Meanwhile, the draw for the football contests at the upcoming Asian Games in Hangzhou, China, was held by the organizing commit-

tee of the event and Iran's under-23 team was pitted against Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, and Mongolia in Group B. The competition – starting four days before the Games' opening ceremony on September 23 – will come as a perfect preparation for Reza Enayati's men ahead of their bid for a place in next year's Paris Olympics. The host country, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and India are in Group A, with Uzbekistan, Syria, and Afghanistan squaring off in Group C.

Group D comprises three teams – Qatar, Japan, and Palestine – while in Group E Thailand, South Korea, Bahrain, and Kuwait will battle it out for a place in the knockout phase. Group F will feature North Korea, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, and the Chinese Taipei. The top two of each group plus four of the best third-placed teams will advance to the round of 16. Iran is a four-time champion at the Asian Games, having last won the gold medal in Busan, South Korea, in 2022.

## Iran U19 beats Brazil in volleyball friendly



● volleyball.ir

### Sports Desk

Iran's under-19 volleyball team came out on top against Brazil in four sets in a friendly game on Thursday.

Preparing for the upcoming FIVB Boys' U19 World Championship in San Juan, Argentina, Mohammad Vakili's side won the first set 25-21 before the host tied the game at 1-1, thanks to a 30-28 win in a thrilling second set in front of a jam-packed crowd in Santa Rita do Sapucaí. The Asian champion still managed to walk away with a 3-1 victory, taking the final two sets 25-17 and 25-19.

Mani Alikhani, Seyyed Matin Hosseini, Taha Behboudnia, Armin Qelich-Niazi, Mohammadreza Alejalil, Omran Kukjeili, and Morteza Tabatabaei (libero) were in the Iranian starting lineup.

"We are here to bolster the team's confidence [ahead of the World Championship]," Vakili said after the game as he welcomed the test of playing against the home side's cheering fans.

"The pressure of the crowd was overwhelming, and Brazil caused us problems in reception with powerful and risky serves in the second set, though we were the superior team in all aspects of the game in the third and fourth sets," added the Iranian head coach, whose team will be chasing a third world title – first since 2017 – in Santa Rita. A bronze medalist in the event two years ago on home soil, Iran will begin its campaign with a game against fellow Asian side South Korea on August 2 in Pool C – also featuring Nigeria, Columbia, and Puerto Rico.

The host country – also the reigning South American champion – will headline Pool A, with the United States, Egypt, Serbia, and Costa Rica also in the group.

Bulgaria – beaten by Poland in the 2021 final – is in Pool B alongside India, Japan, France, and Slovenia, while Pool D will see European champion Italy and Brazil as well as Belgium, Mexico, and Chile battle it out for a place in the knockout phase.

The top four teams of each pool will progress to the last-16 round.

Having won a maiden trophy in 2007, Iran is also a two-time silver winner in the under-19 championship in 2001 and 2009, while settling for the bronze medal on three occasions (2003, 2015, and 2017).

# Ukraine's Kharlan calls for rule change after disqualification for snubbing Russian opponent

**REUTERS** – Ukrainian fencer Olga Kharlan has said rules have to change following her disqualification for refusing to shake hands with Russian Anna Smirnova at the World Championships in Milan on Thursday. Kharlan, a four-time Olympic medallist and world champion, won the individual sabre bout 15-7 and then refused to shake hands with her opponent, instead offering her sabre to tap blades. Smirnova remained on the piste for over half an hour after the incident, speaking with a number of officials before leaving. In fencing's rules, shaking an opponent's hand is mandatory and failure to do so

results in a 'black card'. "Today was a very difficult and very important day. What happened today raises a lot of questions," Kharlan said in a video posted on Instagram later on Thursday. "I did not want to shake hands with this athlete, and I acted with my heart. So when I heard that they wanted to disqualify me it killed me so much that I was screaming in pain. "I think I understand, like everyone else in this world, in a sane world, that the rules have to change because the world is changing." Tennis player Elina Svitolina, and local football clubs such as Dynamo Kyiv and Shakhtar Donetsk have

been among the figures who have expressed their solidarity on social media for the 32-year-old fencer. Ukrainian athletes in other sports – including Svitolina and fellow tennis player Marta Kostyuk – have also refused to shake hands with Russian and Belarusian opponents following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with Moscow using Belarus as a staging ground for what it calls a "special military operation". "We fully support Olga Kharlan in this situation. We are preparing a protest," Mykhailo Illiashev, president of Ukraine's fencing federation (NFFU), said in televised comments. "We will appeal this decision, because the referee

who judged this match did not give directly a black card or disqualify her. "It was only later that the underhanded games began and this disqualification appeared already after the next opponent was determined, already after a judge for the next competition was determined." Ukrainian Sports Minister Vadym Huttsait described the incident as "an obvious provocation from the Russian side".



Ukraine's Olga Kharlan (L) offers her sabre as she refuses to shake hands with Russia's Anna Smirnova, registered as an Individual Neutral Athlete (AIN), at the FIE Fencing World Championships in Milan, Italy, on July 27, 2023. ● AFP

