

## Riyadh 2025 Islamic Solidarity Games:

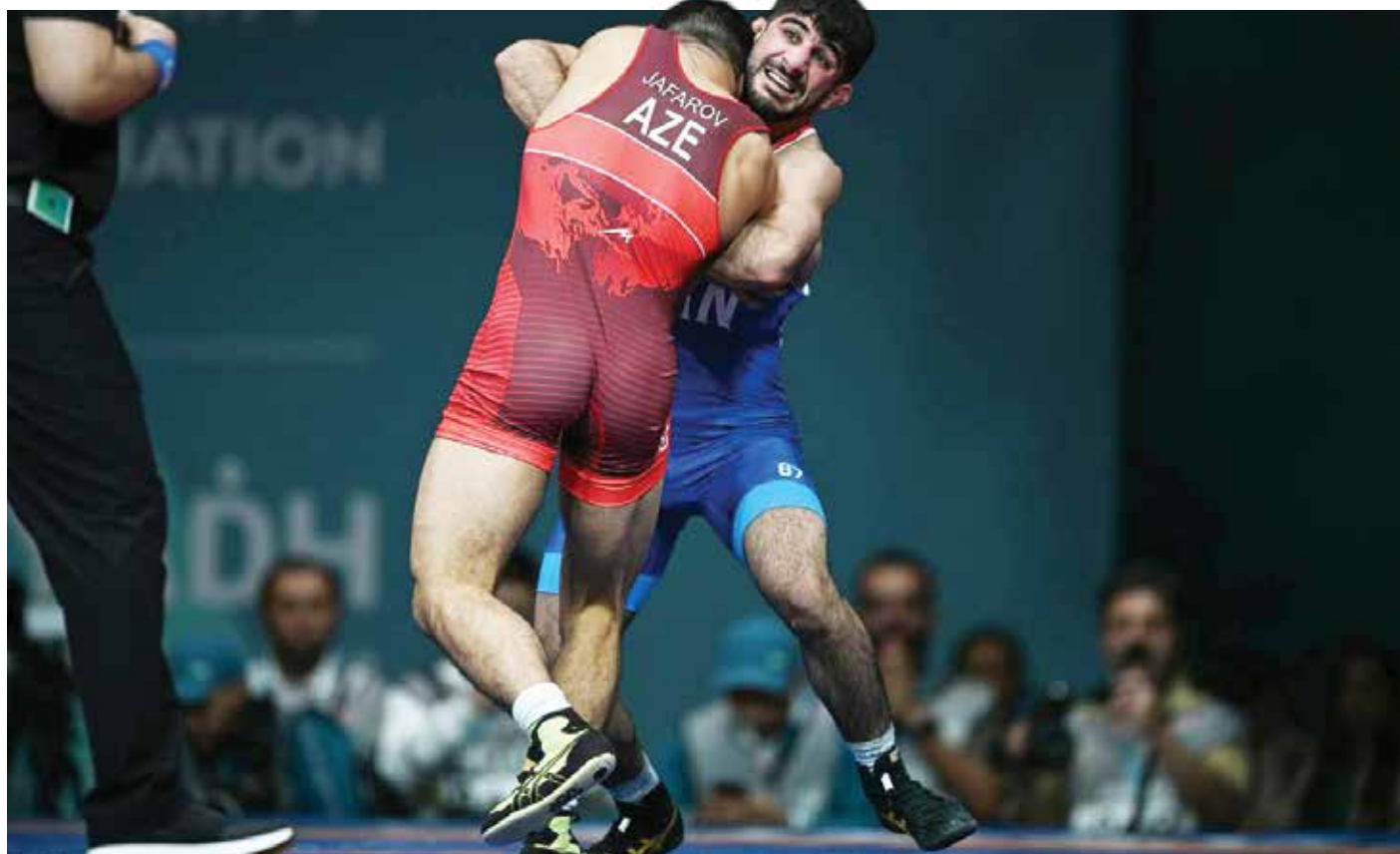
## Esmaeili's last-gasp fightback propels Iran to double Greco-Roman golds

## Sports Desk

Saeid Esmaeili and Gholamreza Farrokhi gave Iran a strong start in wrestling at the Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh, capturing gold in their respective Greco-Roman classes on Tuesday. Their final victories propelled Iran to 19 gold medals at the multi-sport event, though the country was still dealt a major blow in the two-horse race for the runner-up spot in the overall standings, as second-placed Uzbekistan enjoyed success in athletics and wrestling to open a six-gold lead with three days of action remaining. Amir Abdi and Ali Ahmadi-Vafa were also among Iran's wrestling medalists on Tuesday, claiming silver and bronze respectively, while Mohammadreza Tayyebi settled for silver in the men's shot put in athletics.

## Esmaeili remains unbeaten

Esmaeili came within two seconds of suffering only the second defeat of his senior international career – and his first since June 2024 – but the 22-year-old sensation produced a trademark four-pointer to defeat Azerbaijan's Hasrat Jafarov 8-3 in a thrilling 67kg showdown. The two familiar foes met in the final at September's World Championships, with Esmaeili needing a flawless defense to secure a 3-1 victory. On Tuesday, however, Jafarov looked to be on his way to upsetting the reigning world and



Iranian wrestler Saeid Esmaeili (blue) performs a four-point throw against Hasrat Jafarov of Azerbaijan in the Greco-Roman 67kg final at the Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on November 18, 2025.

● IAWFIR

Farrokhi, who moved to 87kg for the U23 World Championships, won gold in Novi Sad without conceding a single point.

The Iranian still had a tough job securing a place in the final showpiece in Riyadh, as he needed a takedown in the final minute to edge world bronze medalist Asan Zhanyshov of Kyrgyzstan 7-6 in the semifinals. In the 77kg event, Abdi enjoyed an emphatic run to the final, defeating the two-time reigning world 72kg champion from Azerbaijan (9-0) and Uzbekistan's Abdullo Aliev – a world bronze medalist in September – 6-0 in the process.

In the final, however, the Iranian was second best against two-time Olympic medalist and two-time world champion Akzhol Makhmudov of Kyrgyzstan, who, trailing 1-0, performed a reverse-lift throw for five points before securing the fall in the second period.

Ahmadi-Vafa – a world junior and U23 gold medalist last year – bounced back from a technical-superiority loss to world silver medalist Alisher Ganiev in the semifinals to beat Azerbaijan's 2024 world champion Nihat Mammadli 3-2 for a consolation bronze in the 60kg division.

Olympic champion when he took a three-point lead by the end of the first period. Esmaeili erased the deficit after the break, though still down on criteria, and all seemed to be over for the Iranian as the clock ticked down, before he worked on a double-arm lock and then managed to throw Jafarov in danger from standing for four points. Azerbaijan challenged the call,

but there was no change in the result as Esmaeili emerged victorious to capture his third major gold of the calendar year after Asian and world titles. "We went straight into a training camp after the World Championships to prepare for the Games. The level of competition here was truly world-class, with the top five from the world event all participating, and I had to face world 63kg champion [Ayt-

jan Khalmakhanov of Uzbekistan] in the semifinals," Esmaeili said after his sensational victory. "I was in much better form when I faced Jafarov last time, as I came into this tournament still carrying some fatigue from that World Championships," added the Iranian. When asked about the high expectations for him to repeat his Olympic gold in L.A. 2028, Esmaeili said: "There are still

about two years and eight months until the Olympics, and I will work hard to retain my title in the Los Angeles Games and bring joy to all of my fellow Iranians." Later in the day, world 82kg champion Farrokhi made it seem a little easier as he defeated former world U20 champion Islam Yevloyev of Kazakhstan 6-0 to cap off a glorious two months in his career.

## Qalenoeei lauds 'massive improvement' despite shootout setback against Uzbekistan

## Sports Desk

Iran head coach Amir Qalenoeei shrugged off the shootout loss to Uzbekistan in the Al Ain International Cup final on Tuesday, praising his side's "massive improvement" over the two games during the latest international break. The two Central Asian rivals played to a goalless stalemate in their seventh meeting in two years before Uzbekistan, reduced to 10 men after Manchester City center-back Abdudodir Khusanov was sent off for denying Ali Alipour a clear goal-scoring opportunity with 20 minutes remaining, emerged victorious 4-3 on penalties.

Iranian goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand saved Jamshid Iskanderov's attempt, but his teammates Mohammad-Mahdi Mohebbi and Milad Mohammadi then had their efforts kept out by Abduvohid Nematov, leaving Qalenoeei's men without a win against Uzbekistan since the 2023 CAFA Nations Cup final.

"I think we were not good enough until the mid-way point of the first, but after that – especially in the second period – we were in control of the game. Fortunately, taking last month's game against Tanzania into account, my



Iranian striker Ali Alipour (white) is fouled by Uzbekistan's Abdudodir Khusanov during the Al Ain International Cup final in Al Ain, UAE, on November 18, 2025.

● MILAD ESMAEILI/ISNA

team has now managed to keep three consecutive clean sheets," said Qalenoeei, whose team defeated Cape Verde on penalties last Thursday to book a final spot in the four-team tournament. "Wins or losses are not important in these kinds of matches, but it is our team's massive improvement at both ends of the pitch that truly matters, as we were solid in defense and managed to create many chances," added the Iranian.

"We achieved our objectives in this tournament, and I think anyone with a fair assessment would have to praise Iran's performance here." Qalenoeei also rued the absence of several key players in the Iranian squad, who missed the two games in Al Ain due to injury. "Just look at the difference Majid Hosseini made to our defensive structure after returning from a long spell out. Now, imagine how players like Sardar Azmoun, Mahdi Qa-

yedi, Ali Qolizadeh, and even Alireza Jahanbakhsh would have contributed to the team's strength and quality if they were available. "Unlike the game against Cape Verde, we were much quicker in attack and moved the ball faster today, which I'm really pleased with. However, to sustain this, we will need all of our injured players to recover and add to the team's caliber, as we are far from a finished article for the World Cup finals."

## 25th Summer Deaflympics: Ghaffari, Samiei team up for shooting bronze

## Sports Desk

Iranian shooters Mahla Samiei and Bijan Ghaffari teamed up to claim an impressive bronze medal in the 10m air pistol mixed pair event at the Tokyo Summer Deaflympics on Wednesday. Having finished fourth in the qualifying round with 561.16 points, the Iranian duo defeated Ukraine's Sofiia Olenych and Oleksandr Kolodil 17-9 in the third-place matchup. Indian pair Pranjali Prashant Dhumal and Abhinav Deshwal won the gold, thanks to 16-6 victory over Kao Ya-Ju and Hsu Ming-Jui of the Chinese Taipei in the final showdown.

Wednesday's medal marked a second bronze for Samiei in Tokyo, after the Iranian girl had tallied 215.5 points to finish behind India's Anuya Prasad, who set a new world record with 241.1 points, and Dhumal (236.8 points) in the women's division of the discipline on Tuesday. Iran has collected six bronze medals after five days of competition at the multi-sport event. Ali Salahshour, Hossein Allahkarimi, and Masoud Rastegar secured a third-place finish in the men's judo team event, thanks to a 2-0 victory over Türkiye on Tuesday, having also finished with a bronze in their respective weight classes.



Iranian shooters Bijan Ghaffari (L) and Mahla Samiei won a bronze medal in the 10m air pistol mixed pair event at the 25th Summer Deaflympics in Tokyo, Japan.

● MNA