

Iran to play Belgium, Egypt, New Zealand in World Cup group stage

Sports Desk

Iran has been drawn against Belgium, Egypt, and New Zealand in Group G of the 2026 World Cup, which will be cohosted by the United States, Mexico, and Canada from June 11 to July 19 next year.

The draw for the 23rd edition of football's flagship international event took place at the John F. Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., on Friday, where 48 teams – six of which will be decided through the playoff paths in March – were split into 12 groups.

Making its fourth successive appearance in the finals, Iran will kick off its campaign against New Zealand on June 15, before facing Belgium – eighth in the latest FIFA Men's Rankings – six days later.

Team Melli will hope to remain in contention for a place in the knockout phase when it takes on African powerhouse Egypt on June 26.

With eight of the third-placed teams across the 12 groups advancing to the round of 32, Iranian fans will fancy their team's chances of securing a first-ever knockout spot at the seventh time of asking.

Belgium and Egypt are emerging from the shadow of golden generations. Rudi Garcia's Bel-

GROUP A	GROUP B	GROUP C	GROUP D
MEXICO	CANADA	BRAZIL	USA
SOUTH AFRICA	FIFA WINNER PLAY-OFF A	MOROCCO	PARAGUAY
KOREA REPUBLIC	QATAR	HAITI	AUSTRALIA
FIFA WINNER PLAY-OFF D	SWITZERLAND	SCOTLAND	FIFA WINNER PLAY-OFF C
GROUP E	GROUP F	GROUP G	GROUP H
GERMANY	NETHERLANDS	BELGIUM	SPAIN
CURACAO	JAPAN	EGYPT	CAPO VERDE
COTE D'IVOIRE	FIFA WINNER PLAY-OFF B	IRAN	SAUDI ARABIA
ECUADOR	TUNISIA	NEW ZEALAND	URUGUAY
GROUP I	GROUP J	GROUP K	GROUP L
FRANCE	ARGENTINA	PORTUGAL	ENGLAND
SENEGAL	ALGERIA	FIFA WINNER PLAY-OFF I	CROATIA
FIFA WINNER PLAY-OFF 2	AUSTRIA	UZBEKISTAN	GHANA
NORWAY	JORDAN	COLOMBIA	PANAMA

● CHRIS CARLSON/AP

gium was erratic in qualification, finding the net eight times but conceding five in two wins over Wales, scoring freely at times, but also struggling to a 1-1 draw away to Kazakhstan.

Egypt is the most successful side in African history, but having failed to qualify during its golden period 15-20 years ago, the Pharaohs have never quite done themselves justice on the global stage. Mohamed Salah and Omar Marmoush give Egypt cutting edge, but it was a defense – which conceded only twice in 10 games – that inspired the African side's unbeaten qualification campaign.

A guaranteed place for Oceania

effectively meant a spot at the finals for New Zealand, which cruised through qualifying, winning five games out of five, scoring 29 goals, nine of them by Nottingham Forest striker Chris Wood, but it is the lowest-ranked side to have secured its place in North America next summer.

Iran won Group A in the third round of the Asian qualifiers, with Team Melli's only defeat in 10 games coming in a dead rubber away to Qatar in June.

"There is no such thing as an easy opponent in football anymore. Thank God our group is more favorable compared to the other groups, though we can't

afford to underestimate any opponent, and the team must enter the tournament in its best form," Iran head coach Amir Qalenoee said after the draw. He added, "We have been struggling with injuries to several key players since last year's Asian Cup, but I'm confident that with all of them available, and by integrating some younger players into the squad, we can reach the level we are aiming for." When asked about the team's World Cup preparations and possible friendlies in March, Qalenoee said, "We had talks with other coaches before the draw, and now that the group situation is clear, we will con-

tinue those negotiations. Unfortunately, many teams are dealing with hectic fixture lists in the lead-up to the World Cup. We need to arrange at least four matches against high-profile opponents."

Other groups

The opening game of the competition will see cohost Mexico play South Africa at the Azteca Stadium – the iconic venue of the 1970 and 1986 finals – in Group A, which also features South Korea and one of Denmark, North Macedonia, Czechia, or the Republic of Ireland.

The United States, meanwhile, benefited from its top seeding and will play Paraguay, Australia, and a UEFA playoff winner – one of Slovakia, Kosovo, Türkiye, or Romania – in Group D.

Canada, also a top seed despite its world ranking of 27th, faces a tougher path in Group B against a European playoff winner – possibly Italy – as well as Switzerland and Qatar.

Defending champion Argentina was drawn with Algeria, Austria, and debutant Jordan in Group J, while five-time winner Brazil will face Morocco – semifinalists in 2022 – Haiti, and Scotland in Group C.

France will open its Group I campaign against Senegal, in a repeat of one of the big-

gest tournament upsets, when the African side stunned the then-holders in their first match of the 2002 edition. Norway and one of Iraq, Bolivia, or Suriname complete the group.

England will start against Croatia – the team that beat the Three Lions in the 2018 semifinals – and will also face Panama, which they defeated 6-1 in the group stage of the same tournament, and Ghana in Group L.

Debutants Curacao, with a population of 150,000 making it by far the smallest country ever to reach the finals, faces Germany, Ecuador and the Ivory Coast in Group E.

World No. 1-ranked Spain has a dream draw alongside first-timer Cape Verde, Saudi Arabia, and Uruguay in Group H.

The Netherlands are grouped with Japan, Tunisia, and a UEFA playoff winner – Ukraine, Sweden, Poland, or Albania – in Group F, while Portugal faces debutant Uzbekistan, Colombia, and one of New Caledonia, Jamaica, or DR Congo in Group K. A newly introduced seeding system ensured that the current top four in the world – Spain, Argentina, France, and England – cannot meet until the semifinal stage if they win their groups, though plenty of potential blockbuster clashes remain along the way.

World Taekwondo Under-21 Championships: Iran's Nematzadeh, Zeinali strike gold on Day 3



Iran's Mobina Nematzadeh (l) and Radin Zeinali pose with their gold medals at the World Taekwondo Under-21 Championships in Nairobi, Kenya, on December 5, 2025.

● WORLD TAEKWONDO

Sports Desk

Mobina Nematzadeh and Radin Zeinali captured gold medals on the penultimate day of the World Taekwondo Under-21 Championships, taking Iran's medal count to six at the inaugural showpiece in Nairobi, Kenya, on Friday.

A bronze medalist at last year's Paris Olympics, Nematzadeh bounced back from a below-par campaign at November's Senior World

Championships to defeat Türkiye's Sila Irmak Uzuncavdar 2-1 (9-3, 7-12, 5-1) in the women's -53kg final.

Given a bye in the first round, Nematzadeh – the 2022 world junior champion – began her campaign with a straight-round victory over Morocco's Meryem Ennams, then defeated Germany's Adiba Asimi by the same scoreline to reach the semifinals, where she prevailed in back-to-back rounds against Bosnia's Ada Avdagic.

Another final featuring Iranian and Turkish contestants on Friday saw Zeinali beat Omer Furkan Korpe 2-1 in the men's -74kg showdown. The Iranian prodigy overcame Georgia's Nika Gogoberidze, Kazakhstan's Yergesh Bekassyl, and Spain's Juan Antonio Milan – all without dropping a single round – before overpowering top seed Victor Rodrigues of the United States to book his place in the final. Saghar Moradi and Mahdi

Razmian were the other Iranians in action on Friday, though both finished empty-handed after suffering second-round exits in the women's -67kg and men's -54kg events, respectively.

Friday's results came after Iran had collected two golds and two bronzes earlier in the Kenyan capital.

Amirreza Gholami capped his impressive campaign with a thrilling 3-2, 8-8, 7-6 victory over Spanish top seed Mikel Fernandez Garcia in the men's -80kg final on Thursday, while Hasti Mohammadi settled for bronze in the women's -57kg event following a semifinal defeat to reigning world under-18 champion Amina Dehhaoui of Morocco – the Iranian teenager's second international bronze in less than a month after her medal-winning run at the Islamic Solidarity Games.

The opening day of the tournament saw Abolfazl Zandi – crowned world senior champion in late October – round out a brilliant five-week stretch by winning gold in the men's -58kg category, defeating Russian neutral athlete Magomedg Magomedov 2-0 in the final.

World junior champion Amirmohammad Ashrafi claimed joint bronze alongside Tunisia's Motaz Ifaoui in the men's +87kg division after a 2-1 semifinal defeat to Kazakhstan's Beibarys Kablan.

Persian Gulf Pro League: Persepolis, Esteghlal share points in drab derby; Sepahan goes top

Sports Desk

Capital archrivals Persepolis and Esteghlal played out a goalless stalemate in the 106th Tehran Derby on Friday, while Sepahan defeated Fajr Sepasi 2-0 at home to move to the top of the Persian Gulf Pro League table.

There was little to separate the two city rivals over the 90 minutes at Arak's Imam Khomeini Stadium, with both goalkeepers turning in solid performances.

Persepolis came closest to breaking the deadlock in the first half through Oston Urunov, only for Spanish goalkeeper Antonio Adán to stay alert

and deal with the danger. Making his derby debut, Esteghlal's Saeid Saharkhizan missed the game's best chance five minutes after the break, with Persepolis keeper Payam Niazmand rushing off his line to thwart the Blues' striker from close range as the match ended goalless for the 24th time – the most frequent scoreline in the history of Iranian club football's most anticipated fixture. The result left Esteghlal, whose four-game winning streak in the league came to an end, sitting second in the table with 20 points from 11 games – one point ahead of the Tehran Reds, who have played 12.

The stalemate also meant Esteghlal remains without a league derby victory since March 2018.

Later in the day, French striker Enzo Crivelli and Mohammad Asgari struck in the second half to help Sepahan overcome the newly promoted visitors at Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium and climb to the summit with 21 points.

Mohammad Alinejad and Alireza Ramezani scored either side of Brazilian Matheus Costa's equalizer as Malavan defeated bottom-placed Mes Rafsanjan 2-1 at home to surge into sixth place.

It also finished goalless between Foolad Khuzestan and Iraclo in Ahvaz.



Persepolis winger Oston Urunov (red) is seen in action against Esteghlal skipper Saleh Hardani during a goalless draw at the Persian Gulf Pro League in Arak, Iran, on December 5, 2025.

● AHMAD MOEINI JAM/IRNA