

Iran, Egypt denounce 'Pride Match' branding of World Cup fixture

Sports Desk

The football governing bodies of Iran and Egypt have denounced local organizers' decision to brand the two Muslim countries' fixture at next summer's FIFA World Cup as the "Pride Match" in support of the "LGBTQ+" community, which represents sexual and gender minorities. The two teams will go head-to-head at Lumen Field in Seattle, Washington, on June 26 in their final game in Group G, which also features Belgium and New Zealand.

The organizing committee in Seattle had previously announced its intention to hold celebrations before and during one of the World Cup matches coinciding with the northwestern city's Pride Weekend in late June. The game takes place two days before the anniversary of the 1969 Stonewall Riots, widely regarded as the beginning of the modern "LGBTQ+ rights" movement.

Speaking to Iranian state television on Monday night, Mahdi Taj, the chairman of the Iranian Football Federation, said Tehran and Cairo had both raised "objections against the issue," which he blamed as an "irrational move that supports a certain group." The Seattle committee's website notes that the initiative is not affiliated with or endorsed by FIFA, which famously banned teams competing at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar from wearing "OneLove" armbands demonstrating support for LGBTQ+ rights.

In a statement on Tuesday, the Egyptian Football Association said it has sent a formal letter to FIFA Secretary-General Mattias Grafstrom, rejecting "in absolute terms" any activities linked to "LGBTQ+" support during the match.



⬆ The Lumen Field in Seattle, Washington, U.S., will host the World Cup Group G game between Iran and Egypt on June 26, 2026.
● SOUNDEERS FC

The lengthy Egyptian FA statement claimed the initiative would clash with "the cultural, religious and social values" of both Egypt and Iran, and urged FIFA to ensure the match would remain focused solely on football. It cited FIFA's statutes on political and social neutrality, arguing matches should not be used to promote causes that are "sensitive or of a contentious nature." The statement read: "The Egyptian Football Association explained in the letter that, while FIFA is committed to ensuring a respectful and welcoming environment for all fans, and in order to maintain the spirit of unity and peace, it is necessary to avoid including activities that could provoke cultural and religious sensitivities between fans present from both countries, Egypt and Iran, especially since such activities are culturally and religiously incompatible with the two countries."

"The federation also relied on FIFA's established principle of respecting cultures and encouraging all parties to organize events in a way that respects the beliefs and identities of the participating communities. "Therefore, in order to ensure that the match is held in an atmosphere of respect and focus solely on the sporting aspect, the Egyptian Federation categorically rejects these calls and demands that FIFA not hold any

events or performances related to supporting homosexuality inside the stadium on matchday." The latest controversy comes only days after Iran had to be represented by a limited delegation – including Team Melli head coach Amir Qalenei – at Friday's World Cup draw in Washington, D.C., due to the United States' refusal to issue entry visas for several Iranian officials, including Taj. Taj said the country will have to adopt contingency plans, given that its geopolitical foe may deny entry to members of Iran's squad ahead of June's tournament. "We will be ready for different scenarios, as individuals who have completed military service in an organization not approved by the U.S. might face the same issues. We need to have backups for any player who is not granted an entry visa. "We have filed a complaint with FIFA, and I personally spoke with Mr. Grafstrom in Qatar regarding the matter. FIFA could have taken a firmer stance against the United States, and we expect it to do so if this happens again," Taj said. Iran will kick off its World Cup campaign against New Zealand at SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, California, on June 15, before facing European heavyweight Belgium at the same venue six days later.

Dubai 2025 Asian Youth Para Games: Iranians collect triple powerlifting golds



⬆ Iran's Amirali Rashidi celebrates after a successful lift in the men's par powerlifting 49kg event at the Asian Youth Para Games in Dubai, UAE, on December 10, 2025.
● IRNA

Sports Desk

Iranian athletes got off to a flying start at the 2025 Asian Youth Para Games in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, claiming four medals – including three golds – in para powerlifting on Wednesday. Zahra Pouladi and Mahdiyeh Ehsani captured the top prizes in the women's 41kg and 49kg weight classes, respectively, while Amirali Rashidi won gold in the men's 49kg division on the first day of action at the multi-sport event. Iran's fourth medal came in the men's 54kg category, where Mohammad-Javad Nasirimoqaddam settled for silver. Elnaz Mottaqian added another silver to Iran's tally,

despite three successful attempts (56kg, 58kg, 60kg) in the women's 50kg contest. Pouladi began her campaign with a successful 65kg lift, followed by 69kg and 70kg attempts to secure the top spot ahead of competitors from Uzbekistan and Iraq. Ehsani also completed a clean sweep of her three efforts, lifting 45kg, 56kg, and 59kg to beat the Uzbek and Iraqi powerlifters to the gold. Rashidi, meanwhile, posted successful lifts of 126kg and 129kg before failing at 131kg, but his second attempt was enough for the young Iranian to prevail in a tight contest featuring athletes from Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan, and Iraq. A second lift of 115kg saw

Nasirimoqaddam finish behind the Mongolian athlete, who dominated the event with a remarkable 146kg effort. Named "Children of Iran, Ambassadors of Victory," the Iranian delegation features 194 athletes – including 74 female competitors – across 11 disciplines at the fifth edition of the Games. Iran has participated in all four previous editions of the Asian Youth Para Games, finishing runner-up in the first three – Tokyo 2009, Kuala Lumpur 2013, and Dubai 2017 – before topping the table in Manama 2021. Across those four editions, Iran has collected 144 gold, 139 silver, and 107 bronze medals.

Persian Gulf Pro League: Urunov on target as Persepolis edges Paykan

Sports Desk

Persepolis celebrated a third win in four games in the Persian Gulf Pro League since Brazilian Osmar Viera's appointment as the head coach, defeating Paykan 1-0 in Tehran on Tuesday. Uzbekistan international midfielder Oston Urunov found the net with a delicate lob deep into first-half stoppage time to make the difference between the two sides at an empty Pas Qavam Stadium. The victory saw the Capital Reds move atop the table with 22 points – one clear of Sepahan and two above archrival Esteghlal, though the chasing pack have two games in hand. Saeid Daqiqi's Paykan remained 11th in the 16-team table with 14 points.



⬆ Persepolis winger Oston Urunov (R) celebrates his goal during a 1-0 victory over Paykan in the Persian Gulf Pro League in Tehran, Iran, on December 9, 2025.
● IRNA

Elsewhere, defending champion Tractor was held to a second successive goalless draw in the Iranian top-flight, sharing the points with Qasem Haddadifar's Zob Ahan in Isfahan's Fooladshahr Stadium.

The result left Tractor, which has managed only one win in five league outings, lagging in the fifth place with 18 points, with Zob Ahan 12th on 13 points. In Abadan, Ali Azadmanesh scored from the spot in the

second minute of added time in the first half to lead Khaybar to a 1-0 away victory over Esteghlal Khuzestan. The win propelled Khaybar to fourth in the table with 19 points, while Esteghlal Khuzestan is 13th with 13 points. Struggling Shams Azar Qazvin played to a 1-1 draw against Golgozar Sirjan at home. Reza Asadi gave Golgozar the lead in 63rd minute, only to see his goal cancelled out by Soheil Fadaar three minutes, as Shams Azar snatched a point despite playing with 10 men following a straight red card for Dariush Shojaeian in the 37th minute. Shams Azar remained second from bottom in the standings with 11 points, with Mahdi Tartar's Golgozar sitting eighth on 17 points.

ISF U15 World School Volleyball Championship: Iran into boys' semifinals, crashes out in girls' last eight

Sports Desk

The Iranian boys' team secured a semifinal spot at the ISF U15 World School Volleyball Championship in Shangluo, China, thanks to a straight-sets victory over the host nation on Wednesday. Iran prevailed 25-17 and 25-15 in the best-of-two-sets contest to record its third successive victory in the competition. The defending champion

opened its campaign with a 2-0 win against Nigeria on Saturday, followed by a 2-1 triumph over China 2 the next day, before seeing off Saudi Arabia in two sets on Monday to top Pool B with seven points. Meanwhile, the Iranian girls' team relinquished a one-set lead to suffer a 2-1 (26-28, 25-22, 15-13) defeat against Brazil in the quarterfinals. Four successive 2-0 victo-



⬆ Iran's volleyball team poses for a group photo. Iran dominate Pool D with 12 points.
● ISNA