

FIVB Volleyball Nations League 2026:

Tricky tests await Iran in preliminaries



Iranian opposite spiker Amin Esmaelinejad (10) goes up for a spike during a straight-set victory over Bulgaria at the Volleyball Nations League in Gdansk, Poland, on July 20, 2025.
● FIVB

Sports Desk

Iran has been drawn into a challenging pool alongside Brazil, Bulgaria, Argentina, Serbia, and Belgium for Week 1 of the FIVB Men's Volleyball Nations League 2026, which will start on June 10 in Brasília.

The full fixtures list for this year's competition is yet to be announced by the sport's international governing body.

Iran was beaten in straight sets by South American heavyweight Brazil in its VNL opener last year – also played in Brasília – but concluded the preliminary phase with a 3-0 win against World Championship finalist Bulgaria.

Iran also played Argentina and Serbia in the previous edition, winning 3-1 on both occasions, before defeating the latter in a five-set thriller in the World Championship round of 16 last September.

The second week of action, from June 24-28, will see Iran visit Orléans, France, where Roberto Piazza's men will be joined by the host and reigning Olympic champion France, Japan, the United States, Cuba, and Serbia once again.

Iran and Serbia are also in the same pool in the third and final week of the preliminary round – starting July 15 in Belgrade – alongside Slovenia, Türkiye, Germany, and Ukraine.

The top eight teams from the preliminary 18-team standings will progress to the VNL Finals, which will start in Ningbo Beilun, China, on July 29, though China is already guaranteed a place in the quarterfinals as the host.

Iran will be looking to take inspiration from a decent run of results under Piazza in the Italian's first year in charge as they chase a first last-eight spot in four years at the annual presti-

gious tournament.

Iran will aim to build on a promising first year under Piazza by securing its first quarterfinal berth in four years at the prestigious annual tournament. After finishing in the bottom three in the two editions prior, Iran staged a late surge in the 2025 preliminaries to place eighth, earning six wins in 12 matches. However, Piazza's team ultimately missed out on a place in the Finals, as China's host status granted them a quarterfinal spot despite the Asian side finishing second from bottom. The momentum from some impressive VNL performances – which included victories over Ukraine, Argentina, and the Netherlands – carried into the World Championship in the Philippines, where Iran advanced to the quarterfinals, before suffering a 3-1 setback against the surprise package of the showpiece event, Czechia.

AFC Futsal Asian Cup:

Iran begins title defense with Malaysian win

Sports Desk

Iran's title defense started with a 4-1 win against Malaysia in their AFC Futsal Asian Cup Group D opener in Jakarta, Malaysia, on Wednesday.

Malaysia forced Baqer Mohammadi into making two early saves, both efforts from Awalluddin Nawi but it was Iran who would take the lead inside the opening minute.

A mix-up between goalkeeper Syaifuddin Syukri and Saad Sani saw what was supposed to be an easy gather turned into a simple tap-in for Mohammadhossein Derakhshani.

Mohammadi came to the rescue of Iran again in the fifth minute, coming out of his goalmouth to stop a marauding Firdaus Ambiah who had broken through the last line of defense.

Similarly, Syaifuddin had to work hard to prevent the gap from widening, making a smart reflex swing to tip away Salar Aqapour's rasping drive in the 10th minute and then sticking his leg out in

the 18th to clear a volley from the same player before Hossein Tayyebi cracked a shot against the post just before the break.

After the interval, Malaysia continued to soak up Iran's pressure with the occasional counter attacks looking dangerous but the reigning champion's efficiency came to the fore in the 25th minute.

Aqapour – from the kick-in – teed up Behrooz Azimi for a precise low strike into the bottom corner which Syaifuddin could do nothing about.

Iran was brimming with confidence now, adding a third a minute later when Tayyebi capitalized on a Malaysian mistake to fire home from the edge of the semi-circle.

Moslem Oladqobad added another for Iran in the 28th minute with Malaysia netting a late consolation through Awalluddin.

Elsewhere in Group D, Afghanistan opened its campaign with an impressive 3-0 win against Saudi Arabia.

Reza Hosseinpour starred with two goals as Afghanistan – quarterfinalist in 2024 – got the resounding start it was seeking.

Japan, meanwhile, signaled its title intentions by overpowering Australia 6-2 in their opening Group C match.

The four-time champion produced a dominating performance at the Indonesia Arena and displayed its attacking talent with six different players finding the back of the net. On Tuesday, Indonesia produced an attacking masterclass as it kick-started its Group A campaign with a 5-0 win against Korea Republic. Iraq also enjoyed an impressive start in the group, securing a thrilling 4-2 win against Kyrgyz Republic.

In Group B, Thailand powered up in the second half to beat a spirited Lebanon 2-0, with goals by Worsak Srirangpirot and Muhammad Osamanmusa giving the 2024 runner-up a well-earned win.

Vietnam came from behind twice to defeat Kuwait 5-4 in a Group B thriller.



Iranian players celebrate a goal during a 4-1 win against Malaysia at the AFC Futsal Asian Cup in Jakarta, Malaysia, on January 28, 2026.
● AFC

Iran to ponder Guijosa's future after below-par Asian handball



● IRIHF

Sports Desk

The future of Spanish head coach Rafael Guijosa Castillo is in doubt following Iran's disappointing campaign at the Asian Men's Handball Championship in Kuwait.

An injury-hit squad forced Iran to withdraw from its final classification match against Jordan on Tuesday and settle for a 12th-place finish among 15 teams.

While "not satisfied by the team's performance," Alireza Pakdel, the president of the Iranian Handball Federation, said the governing body's Technical Committee will have the final say on whether to continue with the Spaniard. Guijosa was appointed to the job for a second spell last September, having guided Iran to a historic bronze at the 2014 Asian Championship in his previous stint.

"The Technical Committee will make a full assessment of Iran's results at the Asian Championship, before making the final decision on Guijosa's future, though significant changes regarding the coaching staff look unavoidable," Pakdel said on Tuesday.

Iran opened the tournament

with a 24-22 loss to four-time bronze medalist Saudi Arabia in Group D of the preliminary round but rebounded to thrash Australia 39-13 in its second outing in the 22nd edition of the event.

A draw against Japan in its final preliminary game would have been enough for Iran to secure a main-round spot. However, Guijosa's men relinquished a five-goal lead in the second half, with Daisuke Tanaka's winner at the death sealing a 30-29 victory for the two-time champion, sending Iran into the classification round for 9th-15th places (the Martyr Fahad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah Cup). Iran hammered India (39-16) and Australia (37-17) in Group IV, but, playing without injured star players Pouya Norouzzinejad, Mohammadreza Oraei, Yassin Kabirian, Vahid Masoudi, and Saber Heidari, suffered a 33-23 loss to China on Sunday to finish runner-up in the classification group table.

"We were in the so-called 'group of death', according to handball experts in the competition," Pakdel said, adding: "Saudi Arabia boasted its strongest squad of recent years, which had won the sil-

ver at the Islamic Solidarity Games [last November]. Japan, on the other hand, had made it to the final in the previous edition and was the only Asian side at the 2024 Paris Olympics. We have not been in such a difficult group in any of the past several editions."

"We were unlucky to miss our star player and skipper Alireza Mousavi for the Saudi game due to late arrival of the team and a delay in submitting the 16-player list.

"It was a major shock and disrupted the technical staff's plans and strategies.

"After bouncing back against Australia, we faced Japan in a decisive match where we perhaps witnessed one of the best performances by the Iranian national team in recent years. I am glad that expectations for Iranian handball have risen so high that we were hopeful of beating Japan. Despite 56 minutes of brilliant play by the national team and the lead we had built over Japan, we threw it all away in the final four minutes. Therefore, the technical committee will thoroughly review the situation that led to the late collapse," added the IRIHF chief.