Iranian sport minister 'definitely opposed' to World Cup participation

Sports Desk

FFIRI

Iranian Sports Minister Ahmad Donyamali is "definitely opposed" to the country's national football team taking part in the upcoming FIFA World Cup – starting June 11 in the United States, Mexico, and Canada – though he said the Iranian government will have the final say on the matter.

His comments were the latest twist in the debate over Team Melli's participation in the global showpiece amid Iran's military conflict with the United States and Israel, which was triggered by airstrikes on Tehran on February 28 that assassinated the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, and several military commanders.

Iran is set to kick off its Group G 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. The team will then travel to Seattle, Washington, to face Egypt in its final group game at Lumen Field on June 26.

U.S. President Donald Trump said in the early stages of the ongoing war that he considers it not "appropriate" for Iranian players to visit his country "for their own life and safety," though FIFA chief Gianni Infantino insisted last week that Iran will play "for sure" at the World Cup, arguing that "sports should be outside of politics."

"How can we have a sense of honor and, like so many, just say, 'Go ahead, play in the World Cup'? We cannot remain indifferent to these criminal events for the sake of football, sports, or the World Cup," Donyamali said on Tuesday.

"Personally speaking, I am definitely opposed to Iran's participation. If there were any sense of honor in international sports bodies, first, they would have stripped the United States of its World Cup hosting rights, and then they would have taken away the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics hosting rights.

"That's what happened with another country which had its entire sport suspended from international events within days after carrying out an attack on another country. Is such a double standard acceptable?" Donyamali said, in an apparent reference to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

With the remainder of the Persian Gulf Pro League season postponed until the conclusion of Iran's World Cup run, a national team training camp – featuring 30 domestic top-flight players – began on Monday in Tehran, as head coach Amir Ghalenoei is eager to ensure his players retain their form despite the lack of competitive football.

"Professionally, I have to do everything I can to make sure the team is prepared. That's why all our efforts, as it stands, are focused on making the necessary preparations for the squad," Donyamali said.

"If the government gives the green light, we will play in the World Cup, but if it says the conditions are not right, we will not go. This is an understanding we have reached with the chairman of the Football Federation and Mr. Qalenoei: if we are to go, the players must be ready. The Iranian people, however, should know that we are doing this with hearts full of blood, and are not blind to their pain."

Three-way battle for Iran's opposite spot heats up ahead of VNL

Sports Desk

The three-horse race for Iran's opposite-spiker position is set to heat up in the coming weeks as the country gears up for a congested international volleyball season.

Italian head coach Roberto Piazza has named a provisional roster for the upcoming FIVB Men's Volleyball Nations League (VNL), with prolific trio Amin Esmaeilnejad, Ali Hajipour, and Bardia Saadat selected for the opposite role.

In his first year in charge, Piazza initially placed his trust in Esmaeilnejad, who repaid that faith with a standout performance in the VNL, cementing himself as Piazza's first-choice option.

Alongside him, Saadat made cameo contributions as Esmaeilnejad's backup during the VNL campaign and delivered an impressive showing.

However, an unexpected injury to Esmaeilnejad on the eve of September's World Championship altered the equation. Saadat, who had earlier been dropped from the roster, was recalled to the camp and became one of Iran's two primary options for the tournament alongside Hajipour.

Hajipour emerged as Piazza's top choice at the world event as anticipated, as Iran made it to the quarterfinals before being knocked out by Czechia. With an impressive performance, he was widely regarded as one of Iran's best players in the competition. The display significantly boosted the coaching staff's confidence in him, establishing Hajipour as a key figure for the team's future.

Now, ahead of the 2026 season, competition for the critical opposite role has entered a more serious phase.

Having recovered from his injury, Esmaeilnejad is seeking to return to his best and regain the coach's trust. On the other side, Hajipour boasts a strong position backed by his successful run with Foolad Sirjan in the Iranian top-flight league, while Saadat – coming off a productive club season in Turkey – is highly motivated to secure his place in the starting lineup.

Amin Esmaeilnejad, pictured during a game against Bulgaria at the 2025 Volleyball Nations League, is the top contender for Iran's opposite-spiker position.
FIVB

Adding to the mix, emerging Iranian talent Amirmohammad Golzadeh has thrown his name into contention as a new challenger. After a notable season in Italy's Serie A with M&G Pallavolo, the young prospect now aims to challenge his more experienced rivals and earn a spot on the national team's final roster for the Nations League – setting the stage for a heated and decisive battle over this key position.

Iran will look to secure its first VNL quarterfinal berth in four years when it opens its campaign against South American heavyweight Brazil in Brasília on June 10, followed by tricky tests against Bulgaria, Argentina and Belgium in Week 1 of the preliminary stage.

The Asian powerhouse will then visit Orléans, France, for the second week of action, starting with a mammoth task against the host and reigning Olympic champion France on June 24. This will be followed by matches against the United States (June 25), Japan (June 26), and Cuba (June 28).

The third and final week of the preliminaries will see Iran go head-to-head with Ukraine in Belgrade on July 15, with further tests against Germany (July 16), Slovenia (July 17), and Türkiye (July 19).

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

Piazza's men will also chase a fifth Asian Championship title in eight editions from September 4 in in Fukuoka, Japan.

Beyond continental glory, additional incentive awaits in Fukuoka as the tournament winner will secure direct qualification to the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics.

A potential showdown between Iran and Japan could follow at the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games, which begin on September 19, where Piazza's side will be chasing a fourth consecutive men's gold medal.

Asian Beach Games:

Iran off to flyer in beach handball

Sports Desk

Iran enjoyed a flying start to its men's beach handball campaign at the 2026 Asian Beach Games in Sanya, China, defeating the Philippines 2-0 in Group A on Tuesday.

Mahdi Qashqaei's men won the first period 14-10 before taking the second 21-20 to secure victory in Iran's maiden handball appearance in six editions of the event.

"The first match is always a crucial one for any team, but we had a good training process over the past 10 days," Qashqaei said. "The National Olympic Committee made great efforts to get the team to Sanya early. We had regular training sessions and a good friendly match, so we were able to face our first opponents in favorable condition."

"The Philippines are a quality, strong Asian team. They have been in beach handball for years and have always achieved good results in various competitions. But today, the players implemented the plans we had in training and reiterated before the match very well on the court, and that allowed us to secure the 2-0 win," added the Iranian coach.

Iran will play Sri Lanka on Friday in its second group outing. The group also features hosts China, as well as Bahrain, India, and Hong Kong.

"Sri Lanka is relatively unknown and has little track record in Asia. But we are gathering the necessary information, analyzing their matches, and then executing the required plans in training so that we can achieve our objectives in this match as well," Qashqaei said of Friday's opponent.

The top two teams in the group will advance to the final round, beginning with the semifinals next Tuesday.

Iran will be represented by 57 athletes across 10 sports – beach wrestling, beach volleyball, beach handball, beach soccer, jiu-jitsu, beach kabaddi, athletics, 3x3 basketball, sport climbing, and water polo. The Games officially began with the opening ceremony on Wednesday, returning after a decade-long hiatus following the 2016 edition in Da Nang, Vietnam.

Iranian beach handball players celebrate their victory against the Philippines at the Asian Beach Games in Sanya, China, on April 21, 2026.
IRIHF