

'Moral bankruptcy': Backlash emerges over proposed Iran-Italy World Cup swap



Iranian players celebrate a goal during a friendly victory over Costa Rica in Antalya, Türkiye, on March 31, 2026. **FFIRI**



Italian players react during a shootout defeat against Bosnia and Herzegovina in the World Cup qualifying playoffs in Zenica, Bosnia, on March 31, 2026. **AP**

Sports Desk

A controversial proposal to replace Iran with Italy at this summer's World Cup – co-hosted by the United States, Mexico, and Canada from June 11 – has been met with criticism from both countries. The controversy broke out when Paolo Zampolli, the U.S. special envoy for global partnerships, confirmed to the Financial Times that he had suggested the switch to U.S. President Donald Trump and FIFA chief Gianni Infantino amid a military conflict between Iran and a U.S.-Israeli coalition. Iran, one of the first national teams to qualify for the global showpiece, has been drawn alongside Belgium, Egypt, and New Zealand in Group G, with all of Team Melli's matches set to be staged on American soil. Italy, meanwhile, has missed out

on a place in the finals for a third successive edition – courtesy of a shootout defeat against Bosnia and Herzegovina in the European playoffs in March. "I'm an Italian native and it would be a dream to see the Azzurri at a U.S.-hosted tournament. With four titles, they have the pedigree to justify inclusion," Zampolli told the FT. According to the Financial Times, the proposed plan is an attempt to repair the strained relationship between the U.S. president and Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni – the pair had a falling out last week over Trump's comments about Pope Leo XIV and the Iran War. When asked by CNN to clarify his comments, the Italian-American said: "A World Cup without [Lionel] Messi is not a World Cup. Italy has the same merits after winning four times the World Cup."

The Iranian embassy in Italy was quick to respond to Zampolli's proposal, saying it showed "moral bankruptcy" by the United States. "Italy has earned its greatness in football on the pitch, not thanks to political privileges," the Iranian embassy said on X. "The attempt to exclude Iran from the World Cup only reveals the 'moral bankruptcy' of the United States, which is afraid even of the presence of eleven young Iranians on the field of play." Italian officials have also pushed back hard at the suggestion. "Italy's possible requalification for the 2026 World Cup ... is firstly, not possible, and secondly, not appropriate," Sports Minister Andrea Abodi told Sky News. "I don't know what comes first. Qualification is on the pitch." Luciano Buonfiglio, the presi-

dent of the Italian Olympic Committee, which oversees all sports in Italy, also dismissed the idea of taking Iran's place. "I would feel offended," Buonfiglio said. "You need to deserve to go to the World Cup." Italy's Finance Minister Giancarlo Giorgetti called the idea "shameful." When asked at the White House on Thursday about Iranian players potentially not being allowed into the U.S. for the tournament, Trump deferred the question to Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who said: "Nothing from the U.S. has told them they can't come." "The problem with Iran would be, not their athletes. It would be some of the other people that they want to bring with them," Rubio said, suggesting that the Iranian team could bring in people loyal to militant groups disguised as journalists and trainers.

"We may not be able to let them in," Rubio said of people around the team. "But not the athletes themselves." He added that there had been "speculation that Iran may decide not to come, but then Italy could fill their spot," without adding details. "If they decide not to come on their own, it's 'cause they decided not to come," the secretary of state said of Iranian athletes. While Team Melli's training camp for the World Cup kicked off earlier this week, Iran's Sports Minister Ahmad Donyamali has insisted that he is "definitely opposed" to Iran's participation, though he went on to confirm that the Iranian government will have the final say on the matter. "How can we have a sense of honor and, like so many, just say, 'Go ahead, play in the World Cup'? We cannot remain indiffer-

ent 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]." "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. "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." Trump had said in March that he considers it not "appropriate" for Iranian players to visit his country "for their own life and safety," though Infantino insisted last week that Iran will play "for sure" at the World Cup, arguing that "sports should be outside of politics."

World Snooker Championship: 'Tough to be an Iranian,' Vafaei says after last-16 progress

Sports Desk

Iran's Hossein Vafaei opened up on the difficulty of playing as an Iranian at the World Snooker Championship amid his native country's military conflict with the United States and Israel. Vafaei won all four frames on Thursday to wrap up a 10-3 victory over China's Si Jiahui and become the first qualifier to reach the second round of this year's championship in Sheffield, Britain. "It's very tough to be an Iranian at this time. It's like you are lifting 10 people on your shoulders. It's very hard," Vafaei said. Vafaei went into Thursday's afternoon session with a 6-3 lead after winning five frames on the spin on Wednesday to come from 3-1 behind. He picked up where he left off, punishing a missed pink from Si to take the first frame of the session 81-22 before winning a



SAM BLOXHAM/GETTY IMAGES

safety battle in the next to go 8-3 up. Vafaei continued to punish his opponent's mistakes in the 12th frame, and a break of 78 took him within a single frame of the second round.

Si attempted to peg him back as he started the next frame strongly, but Vafaei made it nine in succession to book a last-16 meeting with world No. 1 Judd

Trump. "It couldn't be a better match for fans to watch," Vafaei said of his clash with Trump, who beat Gary Wilson to advance. "Of course, it's a tough opponent. I respect him a lot. Hopefully we both show a good performance and everyone enjoys it. Hopefully the game goes the way the fans want." Meanwhile, Vafaei claimed the Crucible must be

respected and called it snooker's answer to Wimbledon, two years on from his scathing criticism of the World Championship venue. In 2024, the Iranian described the Crucible as "smelly" and compared the practice facilities to "playing in a garage." But after last month's announcement that snooker's showpiece will remain in Sheffield until at least 2045, Vafaei highlighted the importance of the Crucible to the sport. "The Crucible is a historical place. You can't compare the Crucible to anywhere else because the Crucible is the home of snooker for all snooker players," said the Iranian. "The Crucible for us is like the Wimbledon Championships. We have to keep the history and then we have to give it respect, and hopefully we can make it bigger together, like Wimbledon, and we become like tennis as well."

Asian Beach Games: Iranian pairs sweep opening matches in men's beach volleyball

Sports Desk

The two Iranian pairs enjoyed an impressive start to their men's beach volleyball campaign at the 2026 Asian Beach Games in Sanya, China, completing a clean sweep of five victories between them over the first two days of the competition. Abbas Pourasgari and Alireza Aqajani teamed up to beat the hosts' Zhang Tai and Zhou Chaowei in straight sets (21-18, 21-17) on Friday for their third successive win in the Games. They sit second in Pool G of the preliminaries with six points – one behind the Chinese duo, which has played four games. The Iranian pair had begun the day with a comfortable 2-0 win (21-8, 21-9) against Bhutan's Tshering Dorji and Jurme Rangdal, having previously defeated Anjana Manikkuhewage and Sadun Andibuduge in straight sets (21-12, 21-15) on Thursday. Elsewhere, Abolhassan Khakizadeh and Amirali Qalenovi celebrated a second successive victory in Pool B



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on Friday, beating the Maldives' Adam Naseem and Sajid Ismail 2-0 (21-15, 21-10). The Iranian pair, which had overcome Uzbekistan's Azamat Dauilbaev and Dilshodbek Tolibaev in two sets (21-16, 21-18) on the opening day of the beach volleyball event, sits second in the group table – trailing Qatar's Cherif Younouss and Ahmed Tijan on set-point ratio. The top spot in the group will be at stake when Khakizadeh and Qalenovi go head-to-head with the formidable Qatari pair – bronze medalists at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics – later today.

Pourasgari and Aqajani, meanwhile, will be looking to secure the top spot in their group when they square off against Syria's Orwa Alsakka and Kutiba Albirini – bottom of the table with three defeats – later today. 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 sixth edition of the multi-sport event officially began with the opening ceremony on Wednesday, returning after a decade-long hiatus, and will run until Thursday.