

## AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027:

## Iran drawn against Syria, Kyrgyzstan, China in group stage

## Sports Desk

Iran has been drawn against Syria, Kyrgyzstan, and China in Group C of the 2027 AFC Asian Cup, which will be hosted by Saudi Arabia from January 7 next year.

The draw for the 19th edition of the flagship continental tournament was held at the historic Salwa Palace in Riyadh on Saturday, where 24 teams were split into six groups.

Three-time champion Iran – a semifinalist in the previous two editions – will kick off its bid for a first Asian title since 1976 against China at Riyadh's Kingdom Arena on January 7, before facing Kyrgyzstan at Al Shabab Stadium four days later.

The final round of group fixtures will see Iran take on Syria at King Fahd Sports City Stadium on January 18. Iran and China last met in the group stage of the 2019 event in the United Arab Emirates, with Iran claiming

an emphatic 3-0 victory. Iran has emerged victorious in all seven of its previous meetings with Kyrgyzstan, though the Central Asian team provided tricky tests for Iran in the World Cup qualifiers two years ago. Amir Qalenoee's side labored to a 1-0 home win in Isfahan and then had to hold off a second-half comeback to win 3-2 in the reverse fixture in Bishkek.

Iran's game against Syria will be a repeat of the last-16 clash in the 2023 edition, which Qalenoee's men won in a penalty shootout.

When asked after the draw whether the Asian powerhouse would end its decades-long wait for the elusive crown in Saudi Arabia, Qalenoee said: "It's unfortunate that we haven't been champions for a long time. It's hard to make predictions in football. I think we truly deserved to win the title in the previous tournament, but bad luck went against us.



The photo shows Iran's Mohammad Mohebi (21) and Syria's Fahd Youssef jumping for a header during a last-16 game at the 2023 AFC Asian Cup in Doha, Qatar, on January 31, 2024. AFP

"Our team is in good condition; we are one of the teams that qualified earliest for the World Cup, and we hope to perform well there and then get ready for the Asian Cup. "After the World Cup, we are going to have a generational

change, and I hope we can be a worthy representative of the people of Iran.

"Football has improved across Asia, and the teams have become much closer in level. Even though we have four seedings, the competi-

tion in Asian football has become very tight," the Iranian head coach added.

In other groups, host nation Saudi Arabia, seeking to lift the coveted trophy for the fourth time, will face 1980 winner Kuwait, Oman, and

Palestine in Group A. Saudi Arabia will kick off against Palestine at the 72,000-seater King Fahd Sports City Stadium in Riyadh.

Group B will see Uzbekistan, Bahrain, North Korea, and Jordan vying for a place in

the round of 16.

Australia – champion in 2015 – leads Group D, which also features Tajikistan, 2007 winner Iraq, and Singapore. Aiming to deny two-time winner South Korea progression from Group E are the United Arab Emirates, Vietnam, and either Lebanon or Yemen, who will meet in June to decide the final qualifier for the continental showpiece.

Record four-time winner Japan leads Group F, with two-time defending champion Qatar, Thailand, and Indonesia also seeking to advance to the knockout stage.

The top two sides from each group and the four best third-placed teams will advance to the round of 16, which will be played between January 22 and 25. The quarterfinals are scheduled for January 28 and 29, with the semifinals on February 1 and 2.

The final will be played on February 5 at King Fahd Sports City Stadium.

## AVC Asian U18 Beach Volleyball Championships:

## Iranian teams crash out in quarterfinals



● AVC

## Sports Desk

The two Iranian pairs missed out on last-four spots at the AVC Asian U18 Beach Volleyball Championships after suffering defeats against their Kazakhstani and Qatari opponents in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, on Saturday. Iranian Team A – featuring Amirreza Jamshidi and Amin Vakili – which had topped Pool C with maximum points, began the day with a straight-set victory (21-16, 21-11) over Kazakhstan's Ilya Pavlov and Vladislav Shelekhov to progress to the quarterfinals. However, they later surrendered a one-set lead to lose 2-1 (18-21, 21-11, 15-10) to the other Kazakhstani duo in the tournament, Orazali Sagynysh and Agabek Alikhan, at Tashkent's Olympic Village – a repeat

of the setback the Iranian team suffered when the two sides met in the CAVA U18 Championship final in the Uzbek capital last week.

Despite failing to secure a semifinal spot, the Iranian team will still have a chance to book a place at the upcoming U18 World Championships in through a classification playoff clash against Japan's Rikuho Kashiwaki and Sota Sugiura.

Meanwhile, Iran's Sina Al-e Yassin and Vahab Ownaq – bronze medalists at the CAVA event – also got off to a winning start on Saturday, beating Hong Kong's Chung Siu Wing and Lee Yat Hei 2-1 (21-13, 19-21, 15-9) in the round of 16, before falling in back-to-back sets to Qatar's Moussa Alkheer and Mubarak Musa.

## Ex-world silver winner Tajik replaces Aflaki as Iran's taekwondo coach

## Sports Desk

Ali Tajik has been appointed as the head coach of the Iranian men's national taekwondo team.

A world silver medalist in 2005, Tajik takes over from Majid Aflaki, under whom Tajik worked as the number two in the coaching staff.

A former coach of the Oman men's team for seven years, Tajik will be tasked with steering Iran's campaign at the upcoming Asian Championships – which will kick off in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, on May 19 – followed by the Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games in September.

The appointment ends speculation over the future of the Iranian job after Aflaki refused to attend the team's training camp in recent weeks over a

reported falling out with the national governing body.

Aflaki had been in charge of the national team since 2023 and spearheaded Iranian men's glorious campaigns on the global and continental stage over the past three years.

The former coach led Iran to its first team title in eight years at the Asian Championships in 2024 in Da Nang, Vietnam, but the highlight of his tenure came at the Paris Olympics later that year, where both Iranian male contestants won medals.

Arian Salimi ended Iran's wait for a first Olympic taekwondo gold since Hadi Saei's 2008 triumph by beating Britain's Caden Cunningham in the +80kg final, while Mehran Barkhordari settled for silver in the 80kg class after a final



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defeat against Firas Katoussi of Tunisia.

At last October's World Championships in Wuxi, China, Aflaki's squad collected three medals through Abol-

fazl Zandi (gold), Mahdi Haji-Mousaei (silver), and Amir-sina Bakhtiari (bronze) to finish as runners-up behind South Korea in the men's team standings.

## Shabanpour withdraws from final against Israeli player at ITF event

## Sports Desk

Iran's Hana Shabanpour pulled out of the ITF World Tennis Tour Juniors tournament in Istanbul after getting an Israeli opponent in the girls' doubles final.

The Iranian teamed up with Turkish player Samiye Idil Ozkeresteci to beat the second-seeded pair of Stefania Kadzova and Sofia Vasiltsova in straight sets (6-4, 6-3) to progress to the final of the Ted Nazmi Bari Cup – an ITF J60 tournament.

However, once the final opponents were confirmed to be Russia's Eva Sultanova and Is-

rael's Margarita Aktuganova, Shabanpour withdrew from the championship match.

The decision came in solidarity with the 168 victims – including 120 schoolchildren – who were killed by a U.S.-Israeli airstrike on the Shajareh Tayyeb Elementary School in Minab, southern Iran, on February 28, as well as other victims of the recent hostilities on Iranian soil.

Shabanpour had made it to the singles quarterfinals earlier in the tournament but was undone by Turkish top seed Melis Yildirim in straight sets (7-6(3), 7-6(6)).



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