

# 'We are upset': Iran players hit out at US visa delay after World Cup arrival

## Sports Desk

Iran's World Cup 2026 squad landed in Mexico on Sunday amid a bitter diplomatic row, after the United States refused to issue visas for some team support staff. The Iran coach, Amir Qalenoee, complained on arrival at Tijuana airport that "we should have been here last week because a 12-hour time difference needs two weeks of adjusting. Usually in these tournaments, before technical matters, ethical and human considerations must be respected - which I think for us it was not the case." After departing from their training camp in Turkey a day earlier, the Iran team landed around 5am on Sunday in the Mexican border city of Tijuana. Qalenoee's side will be based in Tijuana throughout the tournament, despite playing all three of their group-stage games in the US.

Iran's players and coaching staff left their plane amid tight security which included a contingent of Mexican national guard troops. The dispute has erupted just days before Thursday's kick-off of the 2026 World Cup, which is being jointly hosted by the United States, Mexico and Canada. Qalenoee thanked world football's governing body, FIFA, for its efforts to help secure entry, but added: "We are upset about this behavior. It has certainly never happened before."

"First of all, we're very happy that the team has finally arrived, and we're delighted about that," Hajsafi said. "Thank God, the team's condition is very good. "With everything that happened, visas were eventually issued.



Iran captain Ehsan Hajsafi (l) arrives with his teammates in Tijuana, Mexico, on June 7, 2026.  
● GREGORY BULL/AP

ing games, two days prior to each match," Alavi said. FIFA rules for World Cups stipulate that a team's coach must give a news conference on the eve of the match at the venue where the game will be played. Iran's Football Federation - whose chief, Mahdi Taj, was reportedly among those denied a visa - has described the decision as "political interference in sport in its worst form."

## Unfair play

The Iranian team was greeted by a small group of supporters waving Iranian flags, eager to give them a warm start to the global showpiece.

"I'm very excited to see them," said Sadeq Galavi as he watched the players' bus leave the airport in Tijuana.

"My national team is coming to my city, and being here is a small thing I can do just to welcome them," the man in his thirties told AFP, proudly wearing the white jersey with green and red trim of the Iranian side, known as "Team Melli."

"It makes no sense to me," Galavi complained about the visa controversy. "Sport is supposed to be a symbol of peace, so when you mix politics and sports, it doesn't work."

With all these off-field developments, can the Iranians play their best football at the World Cup and

Personally, however, I do have a complaint about FIFA. Why did it take so long? As far as I understand, visas were issued only to the players and a few members of the coaching staff."

Some members of Iran's entourage are still without US visas before games in Los Angeles and Seattle. Those include the Iranian Football Federation's secretary-general, Hedayat Mombeini, and its vice president, Mahdi Mohammad Nabi.

"Unfortunately, several key members of our coaching staff, whose roles are very important within the team, were not granted visas," Hajsafi said. "That includes the team manager, the executive director and the media director, all of whom play very important roles."

"From here, I would like to ask FIFA to address this issue so that, God willing, the situation can be resolved in the coming days."

"In the last year, we experienced two imposed wars in our country," Hajsafi added "the team is 100% ready" and insisted "we can advance" from the group stage.

Iran's Group G games will be held in Los Angeles (against New Zealand on June 15 and Belgium on June 21) and in Seattle (against Egypt on June 26). This will be the first men's football World Cup to see a host nation receive the team of a country it is at war with.

The squad spent nearly three weeks at the training camp in Turkey, using their time there to apply for visas to travel to Mexico, Canada and the United States. On the eve of their departure, the players finally received their US visas, according to Washington's envoy to Turkey, Tom Barrack.

Iran's embassy in Turkey said support staff had been denied visas, however. Fifteen administrative and management staff are

concerned, an Iranian diplomat and state TV said.

The embassy slammed what it called "deliberate and discriminatory treatment against Iran's national football team" and called for FIFA "to hold the US accountable for violations of its rules."

Adding to the tensions, Iran's ambassador to Mexico said on Saturday the squad had been notified that, under their visa conditions, the team must enter and leave US soil on the same day as their matches.

"We can enter in the morning and we must leave the same day," Iran's envoy, Abolfazl Pasandideh, told reporters. That appeared to contradict what the team's spokesman, Amir Mahdi Alavi, told Iranian state television earlier.

"The visas issued for the national team are multiple-entry visas, and the national team will arrive at the match venue one day before the first game and, for the follow-

finally advance from the group stage - a feat they have never achieved?

Sina Moqaddam has no doubts, and displays unwavering faith in his team.

"Iran's history goes back thousands of years. Things like this only make us stronger; they won't destabilize the team," boasted the Iranian-American, who had traveled from San Diego, just across the border in California.

Waving an enormous Iranian flag, the retired self-described "patriot" said he was hoping for a match between Iran and the United States in the knockout stage - a blockbuster encounter that would become the political spectacle of the tournament.

"I hope they're going to kick the US team's a\*\*," he laughed as the players' bus disappeared from view.

The security presence offered some reassurance to Hossein Nikyar, who had driven overnight from Los Angeles with his son to herald the team's arrival.

"It's safer for them to be here than in Los Angeles anyway, because many Iranians in LA are royalists who want to take down the government," said the engineer in his forties.

Nikyar already has tickets to see Iran play in Los Angeles. But even before the tournament begins, he cannot hide his bitterness.

"FIFA claims that there's no politics in the World Cup, and it's all about the football fair play," he sighed.

"But in fact, we see that it's not true."

AFP and The Associated Press contributed to this report.

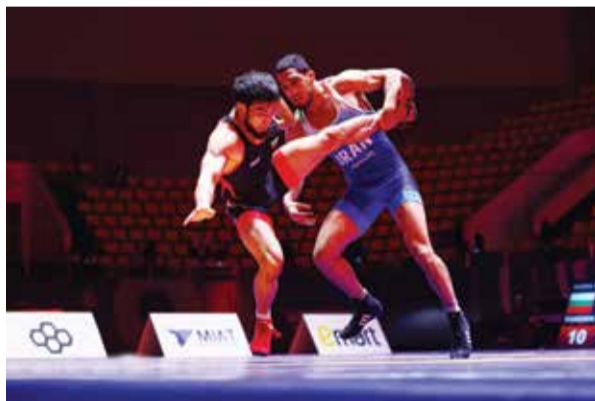
## Ulaanbaatar Open Ranking Series: Amouzad pulls off sensational fightback as Iran bags five FS medals

### Sports Desk

Reigning world champion Rahman Amouzad staged a stunning comeback to win the 65kg gold medal as Iran's five-man freestyle squad completed a clean sweep of medals at the Ulaanbaatar Open on Sunday.

Trailing 8-1 at the break and 10-3 with 1:22 remaining against Bulgaria's Shamil Mamedov, the 23-year-old Iranian returned to his "Ruthless" best in the closing stages to secure a 17-10 victory, avenging his defeat to the Russian-born wrestler in their bronze-medal bout at the 2023 World Championships.

Mamedov hoisted Amouzad onto his shoulders just 1:20 into the contest and brought him down for four points. He never allowed the Iranian to settle defensively on the mat, rolling him twice with a gut wrench to build an 8-0 lead - the first time Amouzad had trailed in 17 bouts since losing the Paris 2024 Olympic final to Japan's Kotaro Kiyooka. Amouzad successfully defended a third consecutive turn - which would have ended the final - before scoring on a stepout ahead of the break.



Iran's Rahman Amouzad (blue) attempts a single-leg takedown against Bulgaria's Shamil Mamedov during the freestyle 65kg final at the Ulaanbaatar Open in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, on June 7, 2026.  
● LAWFIK

The defining moment came with 50 seconds remaining. Amouzad quickly attacked Mamedov's left leg, and the Bulgarian was slow to react as the Iranian trapped the other leg and leapt, bringing Mamedov down in a danger position for four points. Amouzad then added a two-point exposure and a complete turn to move ahead 15-10.

Mamedov appeared to run out of gas, while Amouzad found renewed energy,

adding another takedown before the final whistle to complete a remarkable comeback after scoring 14 unanswered points in just 82 seconds.

The result means the Iranian, who also won a world title in 2022, has lost only two of his last 30 international matches.

Elsewhere on the final day of the Ranking Series event, Mahdi Yousefi had to settle for silver in the 79kg class after suffering a 10-0 superiority defeat to Russia's Ismail Khaniev. Young prodigy Ahoura Khatari - last year's world U20 silver medalist - finished his 61kg campaign with a bronze medal. After a 4-2 quarterfinal defeat to Kazakhstan's Assyl Aitakyn,

he recovered to beat Mongolia's Batnasan Gankhuleg 7-0 in the third-place bout. Sunday's results came after Mohammad Nokhodi and Abolfazl Rahmani had won gold and bronze, respectively, the previous day in the Mongolian capital.

A five-time world medalist at 79kg, including three silver medals, Nokhodi looked comfortable in his new 86kg division, outscoring his opponents 30-5 across three bouts on his way to the final. He was then awarded the gold medal after Bulgaria's reigning Olympic champion Magomed Ramazanov - best known to Iranian fans for defeating Hassan Yazdani in the Paris 2024 final - withdrew from the championship bout because of injury.

Rahmani claimed bronze in the 92kg division in only his second international appearance at the weight. The former Asian champion at 86kg lost his opening bout to two-time world bronze medalist Azamat Dauletbekov of Kazakhstan on criteria following a 4-4 tie. He bounced back by defeating Dauletbekov's compatriot Bekzat Amangali 8-6 in the repechage before beating India's Kumar Punit 4-0 in the bronze-medal match.

## AVC Women's Nations Cup: Iran's semifinal hopes dented by Kazakhstan defeat



Iranian players are seen in action during a 3-1 loss to Kazakhstan at the AVC Women's Nations Cup in Candon, Philippines, on June 8, 2026.  
● VOLLEYBALL WORLD

### Sports Desk

Iran's hopes of reaching the AVC Women's Nations Cup semifinals were all but shattered after a 3-1 defeat to Kazakhstan in a Pool B match in Candon, Philippines, on Monday.

Having beaten the Central Asian side twice at last week's CAVA Championship - including a 3-1 victory in the final - the Iranian women made a strong start, comfortably taking the opening set 25-13.

However, Kazakhstan, which fielded a different squad from the one that competed at the CAVA tournament, responded by claiming the second set 25-20 to level the match.

Inspired by prolific outside hitter Kristina Belova, who finished with a match-high 23 points - alongside Iran's Fatemeh Khalili - Kazakhstan raced into an early five-point lead in

the third set and never looked back, cruising to a 25-14 win before sealing the contest with a 25-20 victory in the fourth.

The defeat was the second in as many matches for South Korean head coach Lee Do-hee's side, which had opened its campaign with a 3-1 loss to Indonesia (25-15, 21-25, 25-21, 25-22) on Saturday. The result, coupled with Hong Kong's straight-sets victory over Lebanon later in the day, saw Iran slip to fifth place in the six-team Pool B standings, while Kazakhstan moved to the top of table with its third consecutive victory. The top two from each of the two pools will advance to the semifinals. Iran will return to action against Lebanon at Candon City Arena on Wednesday before taking on defending champion Vietnam on Thursday and Hong Kong in its final group-stage match on Friday.