

Star-studded cast as Iran confirms taekwondo quartet for Asian Games

Sports Desk

Iran will be among the leading favorites in the men's taekwondo competition at the Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games after confirming a formidable four-man roster for September's multi-sport event in Japan.

Hadi Saei, chairman of the Iranian Taekwondo Federation, said last week that the country would target "not just one, but multiple taekwondo golds" at the upcoming showpiece. The most decorated Iranian Olympian has every reason to set the bar high, with the men's squad heading into the Asian Games on the back of a string of medal-laden campaigns on the international stage over the past two years.

Amir-Sina Bakhtiari was the last Iranian to secure his place in the team after winning a fiercely contested -80kg selection trial last week, defeating Asian bronze medalist Amirreza Sadeqian, Mohammad-Hossein Yazdani and, most notably, Olympic silver medalist Mehran Barkhordari in Tehran.

Bakhtiari will be looking to cap his impressive run of re-



cent results by ending Iran's Asian Games gold drought. The 22-year-old claimed bronze at last October's World Championships before capturing the Asian -74kg title in May. Iran last won taekwondo gold at Jakarta 2018,

where Mirhashem Hosseini and Saeid Rajabi topped the podium in their respective men's weight classes.

Joining Bakhtiari in the Iranian squad is Abolfazl Zandi, who will be the man to beat in the

-58kg division after dominating the category at three major events in the space of seven months.

The former world junior champion stormed into the World Championships final without



L-R: Arian Salimi, Abolfazl Zandi, Amir-Sina Bakhtiari, and Mahdi Hajimousaei will be the four Iranians in the men's taekwondo competition at the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games.

● taekwondo.ir

conceding a single round before defeating Belarusian Georgii Gurtsiev in straight rounds to claim the title.

The young Iranian was once again in a league of his own at last December's Under-21 World Championships in Nairobi, earning the tournament's MVP award after completing a clean sweep of five straight-round victories. Zandi amassed 131 points while conceding just 23, capping his campaign with a victory over Russian neutral athlete Magomedg Magomedov in the final.

His third major gold in seven months came at the Asian Championships in Ulaanbaatar, where he defeated former world cadet champion Yang Hui-chan of South Korea in straight rounds in the final.

Another reigning continental

champion heading to the Asian Games is Mahdi Hajimousaei, who will target the top step of the podium in the -68kg category. The 2025 world silver medalist defeated former Olympic bronze medalist and 2019 world champion Jang Jun of South Korea in straight rounds to add the Asian -63kg crown to the -58kg title he won in 2024.

Arian Salimi will be Iran's biggest medal hope in the +80kg division, arriving as the reigning Olympic and Asian champion.

After suffering a shock last-16 exit at the World Championships, Salimi returned to his ruthless best in Ulaanbaatar, reaching the final without dropping a round in three bouts, including a semi-final victory over familiar rival and 2025 world champion Kang Sang-hyun of South Korea.

The 22-year-old got off to a slow start in the final against Uzbekistan's Marat Mavlonov, losing the opening round 7-7 on criteria before responding with a 6-3 win in the second.

Mavlonov looked set to claim the title after taking a 10-9 lead with three seconds remaining in the deciding round, but Salimi had other ideas. The Olympic champion unleashed a trademark three-point head kick in the final second to seal back-to-back Asian +87kg titles and will now look to go one better than the silver medal he won at the Hangzhou 2022 Asian Games.

Iran aiming for improved finish at Asian U18 volleyball meet

Sports Desk

The Iranian team departed for Thailand on Thursday ahead of the Asian Girls' U18 Volleyball Championship, which gets underway in Nakhon Ratchasima on Wednesday.

Making its ninth appearance at the tournament, Iran will open its Pool C campaign against the Philippines on the opening day in a rematch of the group-stage meeting from the previous edition, which the Iranians won in straight sets.

Iran will face Indonesia in its second outing on Thursday before head coach Akram Qahermani's side takes on record nine-time champion Japan in its toughest group-stage test the following day.

Iran and Japan also met at the 2024 tournament, with the latter claiming a straight-set victory before advancing

all the way to the final, where it lost to China in straight sets.

Iran recorded its best-ever finish at the tournament in 2024, placing sixth after a 3-0 defeat to South Korea. However, the team will look to build on last year's Asian Youth Games gold medal in Manama as it targets an improved finish this time around.

"We've carried out a full analysis of our preliminary-round opponents and are in good shape ahead of our matches against them," Iran captain Aida Baqernia, who was part of the gold medal-winning squad in Manama, said after the team's final training session in Tehran this week.

The young setter added that the Iranian senior women's national team's second successive CAVA Championship title last month "has given us extra motivation for the tournament, and I hope we can continue that successful run."

Joining Baqernia in Iran's Under-18 squad are Saina Bahri-Sefidi, Hadis Arfa'-Rafiei, Sana Naqipour, Setayesh Nasr-Esfahani, Maria Mohammadi, Yekta Kasiri, Elina Latifinia, Fatemeh Homayoun, Melina Ghofrani, Sama Yahyapour, Elena Homayounirad, Asal Valipour and Tara Shakki.

The top two teams from each of the four pools in Nakhon Ratchasima will advance to the quarterfinals, while the remaining sides will compete in the 9th-16th place classification matches.

Host Thailand - champion in 2014 and a semifinalist in the previous edition on home soil - has been drawn in Pool A alongside Uzbekistan, Australia and Mongolia. Five-time champion China headlines Pool B, which also features Kazakhstan, Hong Kong and Kyrgyzstan. Bronze medalist in 2024, Chinese Taipei headlines Pool D, where it will face South Korea, India and Vietnam.



● RASOUL SHIRDEL/volleyball.ir

IHF Men's Beach Handball World Championships:

Iran beats Tunisia but misses out on last eight

Sports Desk

Iran defeated Tunisia 2-0 on Friday to finish its main-round campaign at the IHF Men's Beach Handball World Championships in Zagreb on a winning note.

Iran edged a thrilling opening period 23-22 before sealing the victory with a 19-16 scoreline in the second against the African champion.

Ali Heidarian led the scoring for Iran with 17 points, while Amin Kazemi added 16, though their efforts were not enough to secure a place in the quarterfinals for head coach Mahdi Qashgaei's side, which finished fifth in the six-team Group I standings.

Entering the tournament on the back of last year's silver-medal campaign at the Asian Championships, Iran made a losing start in the preliminary round in the Croatian capital, suffering back-to-back 2-1 defeats to Spain and 2024 bronze medalist Portugal.

Qashgaei's men bounced back by beating the United States in straight



● IRIHF

periods (25-20, 22-18) to join the two European sides in progressing from Group A to the main round.

More daunting tests awaited Iran in the second phase, as the Asian side lost 2-0 (23-16, 21-16) to Denmark, runner-up in each of the previous two editions, before falling 22-20, 23-22 to 2010 finalist Hungary later

on Thursday.

Meanwhile, Hungary defeated Spain 2-0 on Friday to finish top of Group I, while Portugal beat Denmark 2-1 to secure second place.

Spain and Denmark also advanced to the quarterfinals, while Iran will now look to match its ninth-place finish from the 2024 tournament.

Mammadov to decide Iran's final judo lineup for Asian Games: Miresmaeili

Sports Desk

Iranian Judo Federation president Arash Miresmaeili said the country has been allocated six quota places for September's Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games, though Azerbaijani head coach Rashad Mammadov will make the final decision on who will represent Iran at the multi-sport event. "Following consultations with the Ministry of Sports and Youth, Iran was allocated three men's and three women's places for the Asian Games," Miresmaeili said on Friday. The federation chief stressed, however, that Mammadov would have the final say on team selection, with medal prospects taking priority over filling the available quota.

"We want to contribute to Iran's medal tally at the Asian Games, so we will not send any judoka who does not

have a realistic chance of winning a medal," Miresmaeili said. "We will carefully assess each athlete's form, and there is no obligation for us to use all six quota places."

Miresmaeili pointed to Mammadov's selection policy for last year's Islamic Solidarity Games as an example of the coach's uncompromising approach. Although Iran had secured eight quota places - five for men and three for women - the Azerbaijani opted to name a five-member squad consisting of three men and two women.

"Mammadov is a truly de-

manding coach," Miresmaeili said. "Even now, he has reservations about including Pouria Banaeian in the squad for the Asian Junior Championships in July, despite him being a member of both the senior and junior national teams." Iran last won medals in judo at the Asian Games in Jakarta-Palembang 2018, where Saied Mollaie claimed silver and Ali Pakdaman took bronze in the men's competition. The country's only Asian Games judo gold came at Busan 2002, when Masoud Haji-Akhoundzadeh won the men's 60kg title.



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