

# FIFA World Cup: Qalenoey 'proud', but rues poor finishing in Egypt stalemate



Iranian defender Shoja Khalilzadeh reacts after being denied a late winner by VAR during a World Cup Group G game against Egypt in Seattle, Washington, U.S., on June 26, 2026.  
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## Sports Desk

Iran head coach Amir Qalenoey praised his team's unbeaten World Cup campaign but lamented its profligacy in front of goal after a 1-1 draw against Egypt in a thrilling final Group G match in Seattle on Friday.

Iranian center-back Shoja Khalilzadeh thought he had scored a dramatic stoppage-time winner, only for the Iranian bench's wild celebrations to be cut short after his strike was chalked off by VAR for a marginal offside.

Saeid Ezzatollahi, meanwhile, headed against the woodwork in the seventh minute of added time as the draw, coupled with Belgium's 5-1 hammering of New Zealand in the simultaneous fixture, saw Iran finish third in the group with three points and remain in limbo over a maiden knockout-stage appearance in seven World Cup campaigns.

Despite missing out on an automatic place in the last 32, Team Melli made history by avoiding defeat in all three group-stage matches for the first time at the World Cup.

However, Qalenoey and his players were left waiting for the conclusion of the group stage to learn whether they had secured a last-32 meeting with Switzerland on Saturday as one of the eight best third-placed teams across the 12 groups.

Results elsewhere earlier in the day had already guaranteed Egypt a place in the knockout stage before kick-off at Lumen Field, but the African side still made the brighter start and took the lead through Mahmoud Saber inside five minutes.

Iran responded impressively and, although captain Mahdi Taremi saw his penalty saved by Mostafa Shobeir, the Asian side equalized shortly afterwards when Ramin Rezaeian smashed in a rebound from a tight angle in the 14th minute to become Iran's all-time top

scorer in World Cup history with three goals.

Before the dramatic finale, Taremi also headed against the crossbar from a corner late in the game, although the referee had already blown for a foul, meaning the goal would not have counted.

"Let me say how proud I am of my country, my people, and this team," Qalenoey said after the match, praising his players, who have competed at the World Cup against the backdrop of Iran's conflict with co-host the United States.

"We created plenty of chances and could have won. They scored from one opportunity, while we failed to convert 10. We also had a goal ruled out by VAR, and they say the scorer was offside by just five centimeters."

The Iranian, only the third domestic coach to lead Team Melli at a World Cup since its debut in 1978, added: "Despite everything we had to deal with, justice was not done for us."

"Perhaps this is another test from God. I believe in my team. We are a very complete side in attack. Now we have to wait and see what tomorrow brings. I also want to thank all the Iranian supporters, both inside and outside the stadium."

Qalenoey also criticized what he described as the hosts' treatment of his team throughout the tournament.

"What these young players have achieved deserves to be etched in history because the host treated us in the worst possible way," he said.

"Had we been allowed to arrive for the World Cup two weeks earlier, the team would have adapted better. Even our request to arrive two days earlier before this match, so we could prepare properly and remain in one place to recover, was not granted. If that had happened, we might have been in our best physical condition."

Reflecting on Iran's campaign, Qalenoey highlighted several

positives.

"There are a few important takeaways from these three matches. In all three games, the Player of the Match came from Iran. For the first time in our World Cup history, we finished the group stage unbeaten. I always thought we were an oppressed team in this tournament, but now I realize we are unlucky as well. Overall, these players deserve enormous credit."

The coach also contrasted Iran's preparations with those of its opponents. "Egypt played Brazil and England in warm-up matches before the tournament, while we faced very ordinary teams. That affected our technical, tactical, and physical preparation. Despite all that, the Iranian national team has earned the admiration of people around the world, and many want to see us remain in this tournament. We now hope tomorrow's results in go our way. The rest is in God's hands."

He acknowledged the unusual nature of his team's preparations.

"It's actually ridiculous that two World Cup matches ended up serving as warm-up games. But if we qualify, we'll be in even better condition than we were today."

Qalenoey also criticized his team's travel arrangements during the tournament.

"Scientifically and physiologically, players are at their lowest physical level immediately after a match. If you then make them travel straight to high altitude, recovery is delayed by several days. This is the third time this has happened to us. Now we have to travel back to Tijuana again, which means another three hours on the road. We were treated very badly, and I hope the world recognizes that. "I ask FIFA not to allow host countries to treat teams this way at future World Cups. I hope President Gianni Infantino takes action against this kind of behavior."

# Volleyball Nations League: Piazza frustrated by inconsistency, calls for belief after Japan setback

## Sports Desk

Head coach Roberto Piazza said his Iranian players must realize they are capable of "doing everything" after his side suffered a 3-2 defeat (25-19, 25-19, 20-25, 23-25, 15-12) to Japan in the FIVB Men's Volleyball Nations League in Orléans, France, on Friday.

Iran was outclassed by the Asian powerhouse in the opening two sets but mounted an impressive comeback to level the match by taking the third and fourth. However, Japan held its nerve in the deciding set to hand Piazza's side a sixth defeat in seven preliminary-round matches.

The loss left Iran 16th in the 18-team standings with five preliminary matches remaining, dealing another blow to its hopes of reaching the VNL Finals for the first time in four years. Japan, meanwhile, remained top of the table by extending its unbeaten run.

Japan's attacking efficiency proved decisive, with the team posting an impressive 66 percent success rate on offense. Outside hitter and captain Yuki Ishikawa led all scorers with 22 points, including an ace. Fellow outside hitter Ran Takahashi added 19 points, including two aces, a block, and the match-winning point. Middle blocker Larry Ik Evbade-Dan finished

with 15 points, while opposites Kento Miyaura and Yuji Nishida, who shared playing time, contributed 15 and 13 points, respectively.

thing, but we need to prove it on the court," added the Italian coach, whose team opened the second week of preliminary action with a

ress since he took charge 21 months ago.

"I feel that we are improving, and I hope the players can see it too, although I am still not



Japanese opposite Yuji Nishida (1) hits a spike during a 3-2 victory over Iran in the FIVB Men's Volleyball Nations League in Orléans, France, on June 26, 2026.  
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Young outside hitter Ali Haqqarast paced Iran with 19 points. Captain Morteza Sharifi produced three aces and two blocks to finish with 16 points, while opposite Mobin Nasri added 13. Middle blocker Seyyed Eisa Naseri also reached double figures with 12 points.

"I told the guys that it was two games in one; the first two sets and the other three sets," Piazza said, reflecting on his team's inconsistent display. "So we need to understand which one we are."

"We have to believe that it's possible to do every-

five-set loss to Olympic champion France before falling in straight sets to the United States on Thursday.

Piazza lamented another slow start, saying it again proved costly for his side. He stressed that his players "need to control the game from the beginning" and criticized them for becoming distracted by the score instead of staying focused on the match whenever the teams were evenly matched during a set.

Despite the latest setback, Piazza expressed confidence that Iran has continued to make prog-

satisfied," he said.

"We need to play with the same quality, the same ability, and the same desire from beginning to end. In the first two sets today, we needed to play with more desire against an incredible team like Japan."

Iran will look to end Week 2 on a positive note when it faces Cuba, the only winless team in the competition, on Saturday.

The team will then begin its Week 3 campaign in Belgrade against Ukraine on July 15 before taking on Germany (July 16), Slovenia (July 17), and Turkey (July 19).

# Croatian Kljaić named Iran men's handball coach

## Sports Desk

Croatian coach Nenad Kljaić has been appointed as the new head coach of Iran's men's national handball team, ending months of speculation over the vacant position, the Iranian Handball Federation announced on Friday.

Kljaić, who signed his contract at the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Zagreb, is due to arrive in Tehran on Tuesday to officially begin his tenure with the national team. The 59-year-old succeeds former Spain coach Rafael Guijosa, who parted ways with Iran after a disappointing campaign at January's Asian Men's Handball Championship in Kuwait, where the team lost four of its seven matches to finish 12th among the 15 participating nations.

Kljaić is no stranger to Asian handball, having coached Saudi Arabia in two separate spells between 2012 and 2018.

During his first stint, he guided Saudi Arabia to its best-ever finish at the IHF Men's World Championship, including a historic victory over Asian powerhouse South

Korea on the way to 19th place at the 2013 tournament. He returned to the Saudi bench from 2015 to 2018, leading the team to the gold medal at the 2017 Islamic Solidarity Games in Baku and a semifinal appearance at the 2016 Asian Championship, securing qualification for the World Championship.

Kljaić enjoyed an illustrious playing career, representing Yugoslavia 69 times before earning 145 caps for Croatia following the country's independence. His honors include two EHF Champions League titles, a

European Super Cup crown, and an Olympic gold medal at the 1996 Atlanta Games.

Since moving into coaching in 2005, Kljaić has built an impressive résumé at both club and international level. He guided Croatian giants RK Zagreb to the domestic league title and the semifinals of the EHF Champions League.

At club level in Asia, he also led Qatar's Al Rayyan to the final of the 2014 AHF Champions League, where the team finished runner-up after losing to fellow Qatari side El Jaish in Doha.

