

Paris 2026 World Taekwondo Grand Prix:

Salimi, Zandi triumph
as Kiani falters in women's quarters

Sports Desk

Iran's Arian Salimi and Abolfazl Zandi grabbed gold medals in their respective events at the Paris 2026 World Taekwondo Grand Prix to boost their bids for an Olympic quota for Los Angeles 2028.

Nahid Kiani, meanwhile, having suffered a last-eight setback at the Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games, endured a second disappointing campaign in eight days, crashing out in the women's -57kg quarterfinals.

A winner of a historic Olympic silver medal at Paris 2024, Kiani had a promising start on Saturday, beating South Korea's Kim Ga-hyeon 2-0 (19-8, 10-7), and then rallied from behind to defeat France's Manissa Lakehal-Rollings 2-1 (7-10, 19-3, 10-7) to set up a quarterfinal clash with high-profile Brazilian Maria Clara Pacheco. The reigning world champion emerged victorious in successive rounds (7-0, 11-2) before going all the way to collect her third Grand Prix gold of the season.



Iran's Arian Salimi (red) is seen in action against Great Britain's Caden Cunningham in the +80kg final at the Paris 2026 World Taekwondo Grand Prix on October 9, 2026.

● WORLD TAEKWONDO

out the round 14-9. Despite looking drained after a hectic schedule, which also featured a gold medal at the Asian Games, Salimi responded strongly in the second round, taking it 13-9 to set up a decider. The 22-year-old Iranian then prevailed 11-7 in the third to secure his second medal in this year's Grand Prix Series, following his bronze in Muju, South Korea, last month, and collect 60 points in the WT Olympic Kyorugi Rankings. Salimi began his campaign with a straight-round victory (8-7, 12-8) over fellow Iranian Mohammad-Hossein Yazdani, and then defeated Marat Mavlonov in back-to-back rounds, securing his third successive win over his Uzbek opponent following his victories in the finals of May's Asian

Championships and the Asian Games.

Salimi also outclassed Belarus' Artsiom Plonis in successive rounds to advance to the semifinals, where the Iranian overcame Seif Eissa, the reigning -87kg world champion, 2-0 in a high-profile meeting, ending the Egyptian's hopes of back-to-back Grand Prix titles.

In the men's -58kg, world and Asian champion Zandi, who finished empty-handed at the Asian Games after an injury forced him out in the quarterfinals, bounced back in style, sweeping reigning Olympic champion Park Tae-joon of South Korea 2-0 (7-4, 11-6) in the final. Zandi also opened with a win in an all-Iranian battle, beating Mahdi Razmian 2-0 (6-0, 12-3), before a 2-0 victory (14-7, 13-7) against Nigeria's Nouridine Issaka sent him into the semifinals. Zandi led his last-four clash against Jesus Fraile Rodriguez with a 21-2 win in the first round before the Spaniard withdrew from the second.

Double gold

Salimi capped off his impressive run in the men's +80kg division with a come-

back victory over Caden Cunningham in Saturday's final, repeating his triumph over the Briton in the final

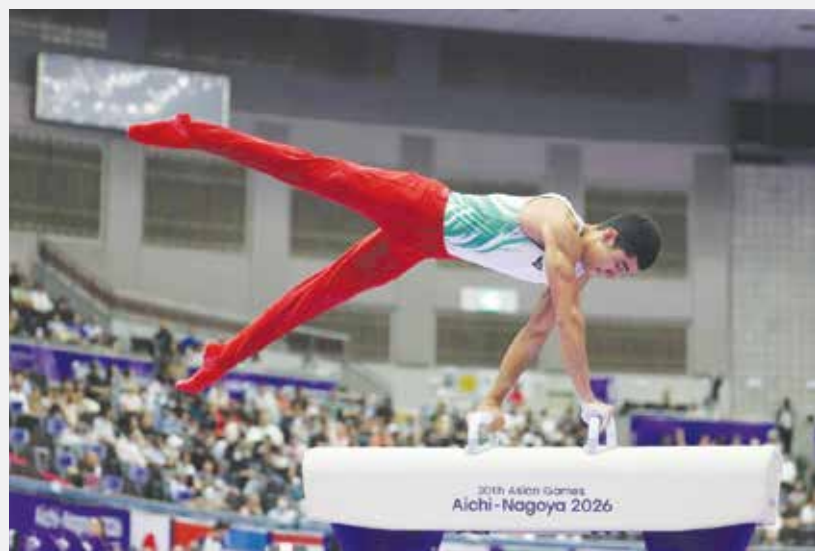
at the Paris 2024 Olympics. The pair traded scores in a fierce opening round before a head kick helped

Cunningham take the lead for the first time at 8-6. Salimi kept chasing, but the Briton held firm to close

Future bright for Iranian gymnastics
after impressive run in Nagoya

Sports Desk

Iranian artistic gymnastics offered a glimpse of its considerable potential at the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games, combining impressive medal-winning performances in the men's competition with historic breakthroughs in the women's events despite the administrative turmoil that has plagued the sport's national governing body in recent years.



A 10-member Iranian delegation, comprising seven men and three women, traveled to Japan following efforts by the Sports Ministry and the National Olympic Committee to overcome the management crisis and internal disputes that have plagued the country's Gymnastics Federation.

In the men's artistic gymnastics competition, the Iranian roster featured Mahdi Olfati in the vault, Mahdi Ahmadvand on the rings, Arman Khodaei on the pommel horse, Mohammadreza Hamidi on the horizontal bar, and Siavash Siahi on the rings.

Hangameh Hadiani, meanwhile, made history by becoming the first Iranian woman since the 1979 Islamic Revolution to compete at the Asian Games in the vault while wearing Islamic hijab. Fatemeh Tavassoli and Yalda Hassan-Shokati represented Iran in women's trampoline, while Arya Mam-Abdollah and Mohammad Saeidabadi competed in the men's event.

Coaches Reza Kheirkhah, Mahan Bajrang and Somayeh Cheraghi also

qualified for finals, underlining the country's growing ambitions beyond simply gaining international experience.

Khodaei, just 20, delivered the campaign's most remarkable result by winning silver on the pommel horse. Competing in his first international event, he secured Iran's first-ever Asian Games medal in the apparatus.

A winner of a historic silver medal at Hangzhou 2022, Olfati replicated his success in the vault, though he narrowly missed out on gold by just 0.066 points. The women's campaign, meanwhile, carried significance beyond the results. Hadiani's appearance in Islamic dress marked a historic milestone for Iranian women's gymnastics, demonstrating that the athletes could compete on the continental stage while observing the country's dress requirements.

In trampoline, Mam-Abdollah narrowly missed out on a medal in what many believed was the result of controversial judging decisions in the final. Tavassoli also made history as the first Iranian female gymnast to qualify for an Asian Games final. Hassan-Shokati could also have challenged for a strong result but for an injury that disrupted her campaign. Together, their performances and milestones point to a bright future for the sport in Iran ahead of major events in the coming years.

The results in Nagoya offer a message to Iranian sports policymakers as they look toward the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics: artistic gymnastics, one of the Olympics' most medal-rich sports, should not be overlooked amid administrative disputes.

With sustained support, improved management and continued investment, the sport could become a more significant source of international success for Iran.



Iran's Arman Khodaei performs in the men's pommel horse final at the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games on September 24, 2026.

● IRNA

played a significant role in Iran's campaign, with their close relationships with the athletes and technical expertise helping seven Iranian gymnasts reach the finals of their respective events.

The standout performance came in the men's artistic gymnastics events, where all five Iranian competitors

AFC Champions League Elite:
Esteghlal eyes two in two,
Tractor looks to open account

Sports Desk

Esteghlal will look to build on an impressive opening-day win against Al Sadd when they face another Qatari opponent, Al Gharafa, away from home in the AFC Champions League Elite today at Al Rayyan's Thani bin Jassim Stadium.



● AFC

Jasir Asani stole the show with a goal and an assist as the Tehran Blues defeated Al Sadd 3-0 in their league-phase opener in Basra before the international break, but the in-form Albanian winger remains a doubt for today's game after being forced off injured midway through Thursday's 1-1 away draw against Tractor in the Persian Gulf Pro League.

Al Gharafa could hardly have asked for a tougher opening-round opponent, having faced Al Hilal away from home, with the four-time Asian champions coming away with a 2-1 win.

While the final score suggested a tight contest, it was anything but, as Al Gharafa had just over 31 percent possession and managed only three shots on target.

Meanwhile, the other Iranian top-flight side, Tractor, will look to get

off the mark in this year's continental elite club competition against Qatar's Al Shamal SC, having suffered a 1-0 defeat to the UAE's Shabab Al Ahli in Dubai on matchday one.

The two sides will square off at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Muscat, which serves as Tractor's home venue for the match, after the

Iranian side's players endured an exhausting multi-stage journey, including overland travel through Iraq, to reach the Omani capital. Tractor will be without Iranian international goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand, who has been left out of the squad for disciplinary reasons following Thursday's domestic league draw.

Head coach Javad Nekounam's men will need to improve their finishing, having managed just one shot on target from seven attempts against Shabab Al Ahli.

Debutants Al Shamal came within a whisker of defeating two-time champions Al Ittihad Club in their opener, only to settle for a 1-1 home draw after Georginio Wijnaldum's stoppage-time equalizer salvaged a point for the Saudi Pro League heavyweights.