

Palestinian soccer team prepares for World Cup qualifying games against a backdrop of war



Makram Daboub may be struggling to prepare his Palestinian team for the start of 2026 World Cup qualification but he takes some comfort, for now at least, that his players stuck in Gaza are safe.

The national soccer team's head coach wanted to include Ibrahim Abuimeir, Khaled Al-Nabris, and Ahmed Al-Kayed in a training camp in Jordan ahead of World Cup qualifying games against Lebanon next Thursday and Australia on Nov. 21. But they were unable to make it out of Gaza because of the Israel-Hamas war, now in its second month.

"So far they are fine," Daboub told The Associated Press. "Many of their relatives have died, however, as a result of the bombing."

Two players from Gaza, Egypt-based Mohamed Saleh and Mahmoud Wadi, are expected to join the Palestinian team in Jordan. Daboub, who is from Tunisia, acknowledged it will be difficult for players to focus on football while many have families in danger.

"With the death and destruction in Gaza, the players are in a difficult psychological state," Daboub said.

But for Susan Shalabi, the vice-president of the Palestine Football Association, there's no question that the players and the people want the games to go ahead.

"This is a people that wants to be heard and seen by the rest of the world, wants to live normally like everyone else, so people care about their national team," Shalabi told The AP. "It represents the yearning to be recognized as a free and sovereign nation."

The Palestine Football Association became a full member of FIFA, soccer's international governing body, in 1998 and has had some success at the regional level.

Appearing at the World Cup in 2026 would be a dream for a team that has never come close to reaching the finals via the Asian Football Confederation's qualifying route.

There is a little more hope this time as Asia's automatic qualification allocation has increased from four places in 2022 to eight in 2026, when the tournament will be co-hosted by the United States, Mexico and Canada.

The Palestinian team, which reached a highest FIFA ranking of 73 in 2018, appeared at the Asian Cup in 2015 and 2019 and has qualified for the 2023 continental tournament coming up in Qatar.

"There is no match that you can win in advance," Daboub said. "But we have a good chance of reaching the next round of the World Cup qualifiers."

To be among the 18 teams that advances into that next stage of Asian qualifying, the Palestinians need to finish in the top two of a group containing Australia – expected to take first spot – Lebanon and Bangladesh. They're currently ranked No. 96, eight places higher than Lebanon and 87 above Bangladesh.

Palestine had initially been drawn to host Australia to start this round of qualifying, but the game has been shifted to a neutral venue in Kuwait.

Preparations have already been interrupted as players were unable to leave to participate in a tournament in Malaysia last month. Now the team is based in Jordan to be sure of being able to travel for games.

A win against Lebanon in the United Arab Emirates next week — the game has also been moved from Beirut because of security concerns — would be a huge step toward the next stage.

"We will do our best," Daboub said. "Football is the most popular game in the world. It brings people together. We aspire to achieve good results and qualify to show the Palestinian identity and that this is a people who deserve life and love peace."

Saudi Arabia to host finals of Asia's top club competition



Saudi Arabia will host the final stages of Asia's top club competition for two years, the Asian Football Confederation said Friday, ahead of the country likely hosting the World Cup.

The 24-team AFC Champions League Elite will next season replace the existing Champions League, with \$12 million going to the winning side.

The region's top 24 clubs will be divided into two leagues of 12 across East and West and compete home and away for a place in the last 16.

The eight winners will advance to a Final Stage -- where teams play the quarter-finals, semis and final in a single-leg format -- which will be held in Saudi Arabia for the first two editions in the 2024-25 and 2025-26 seasons.

Saudi Arabia beat off a bid submitted by Iraq's football association "after evaluating the infrastructure and accommodation requirements as well as all other key operational aspects", the AFC said in a statement.

Saudi Arabia is the only bidder for the 2034 World Cup.

It is already hosting the FIFA Club World Cup later this month, the 2027 Asian Cup and 2034 Asian Games.

Saudi Arabia set to host 2034 World Cup as Australia withdraws interest



Saudi Arabia is set to host the 2034 men's FIFA World Cup after Australia withdrew its interest in hosting the global showpiece just hours before the bid deadline on Tuesday.

"We have explored the opportunity to bid to host the FIFA World Cup and – having taken all factors into consideration – we have reached the conclusion not to do so for the 2034 competition," Football Australia said in a statement.

Instead the Australia football federation has opted to proceed with their bids for the Women's Asian Cup in 2026 and the FIFA Club World Cup in 2029.

Australia's withdrawal leaves Saudi Arabia as the only confirmed bidder. The Gulf nation announced its bid on October 4 immediately following FIFA's surprise invitation for expressions of interest from only Asia and Oceania for the 2034 tournament.

In a press release sent out on Tuesday, FIFA confirmed that Saudi Arabia was the only bidder for the 2034 tournament. However, FIFA said that it will still “conduct thorough bidding and evaluation processes” for the 2030 and 2034 tournaments, with the hosts set to be confirmed by October.

Spain, Portugal and Morocco are due to co-host the 2030 tournament, while Uruguay, Paraguay and Argentina will all stage an opening match each to mark 100 years since the first World Cup took place.

FIFA added that it will remain in contact with the bidders to ensure that “complete, comprehensive bids” are received, which will then be evaluated against the “minimum hosting requirements as previously approved by the FIFA Council.”

FIFA says the “priority areas” for the bids are infrastructure, services, commercial and sustainability, and human rights.

Qatari champion Al-Duhail hires former Paris Saint-Germain coach Christophe Galtier



DOHA, Qatar (AP) — Three months after being fired by Qatar-owned Paris Saint-Germain, Christophe Galtier was hired Thursday to coach Qatari champion Al-Duhail.

Al-Duhail announced the hiring one day after ending the contract of Hernán Crespo, the former Argentina forward who coached the Doha club to the Qatar Stars League title last season.

The club had cited a “deterioration in the team results” under Crespo including a 1-0 home loss to Persepolis of Iran in the Asian Champions League group stage this month.

One of Galtier's first games in charge is against Cristiano Ronaldo's Al Nassr, the Saudi Arabian club which leads the group after two rounds. That game is in Riyadh on Oct. 24.

Galtier was fired by PSG in July after just one season in charge and winning the French league.

He is due to stand trial on Dec. 15 in Nice, France, to face allegations he made racist and anti-Muslim comments when he was coach at the city's soccer club.

Al-Duhail did not state the length of Galtier's contract.

Egypt hosts Sports Expo 2023, 'largest in Arab world'



Egyptians are making waves in sport, and having a local expo like this was a big deal for both athletes and fans

Sport enthusiasts, fitness companies, and investors got a taste of competition in Egypt for the north African country's first international sports expo held last week.

"This is the largest sports expo in the Arab world and Africa," said Hazem Hamada, founder of the exposition.

"The expo has two goals. An economic one, as we are trying to attract all the stakeholders in the sport industry," he explained. "We brought representation from sports institutions in Egypt and Arab nations, in addition to investors who are willing to invest in products and services, either in sports, clubs, or factories."

"Our other goal is social, as we are encouraging people to practice sports in Egypt," he said.

The expo was hosted in Cairo, and spread over more than eleven acres. Dozens of fitness brands set up booths, hoping to score big with investors.

"We have a big strategic plan in how to economically manage the sport business along with the private sector," said Egypt's Youth and Sports Minister, Ashraf Sobhy.

"The Egyptian private sector holds the franchise to a large number of American companies, and they are exhibiting gym equipment as well as a lot of other products. We are also matching the market's demands with these companies," he noted.

The expo was also a chance to market to the professionals, and attendees benefitted from the integration within the market.

"We get to know each other, talk to each other, and discuss the needs of pro-athletes," said Hany Qesses, managing director of Mintra.

Egyptians are making waves in sport, and having a local expo like this was a big deal for both athletes and fans.

"I'm happy now because before in order to attend sports events and large expos like this one, we had to travel abroad, like to Germany," said Hany Emam, training manager at Space Fitness. "I'm happy the first expo this year features companies that provide services to sports clubs."