# Uzbekistan breaks decades of heartbreak to qualify for first FIFA World Cup



There was no choking for Uzbekistan this time; if anything, the tension manifested as tears of joy. The nation's long-awaited qualification for the FIFA World Cup—a historic achievement marking their first appearance—came through a tense 0-0 draw against the United Arab Emirates in Abu Dhabi. With this result, Uzbekistan secured a top-two finish in Group A, ensuring they will compete in the expanded 48-team tournament in 2026. Coach Timur Kapadze, whose tenure began in January following the departure of Srecko Katanec, praised his players for their extraordinary resilience and commitment throughout the gruelling qualification.

Uzbekistan’s footballing history has been marred by near misses. Since gaining independence in 1991, the nation has sought World Cup qualification on seven occasions, each time falling short. Notable heartbreaks include a controversial playoff against Bahrain in 2006, where a missed penalty that should have seen them lead by two goals sown confusion and anger, leaving them out of the tournament on away goals. In contrast, the nation’s campaigns in 2014 were thwarted by South Korea, who edged through due to a superior goal difference. However, under Kapadze’s guidance, the team's mentality has notably shifted. This time, crucial players such as goalkeeper Utkir Yusupov made vital saves, particularly in the later stages of the draw against UAE, showcasing a newfound calmness under pressure.

The transformation of Uzbekistan’s footballing fortunes can be traced to recent investments in player development and infrastructural improvements, driven by both the football association and government backing. Emerging stars like 21-year-old Abdukodir Khusanov, currently playing for Manchester City, are testament to the success of these developmental initiatives. An impressive run of victories and performances in youth tournaments, including the under-17s clinching the continental title and the under-20s reaching the last 16 in the World Cup, hint at a brighter future for Uzbek football. Notably, these younger squads have benefited from an Olympic-level club established in 2021, focusing on nurturing young talent.

For many, this historic qualification signifies not just an end to the label of "Asia’s chokers," but also a new chapter for Uzbek football. The support and emphasis on building a competitive national team environment have distinguished Uzbekistan from neighbouring nations that often resort to naturalisation in pursuit of success. Kapadze's vision and commitment are showing tangible results, transforming the national team into representatives of hope and resilience. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's public congratulation to the team underscores the nation's collective pride and the potential for success on the world stage.

As Uzbekistan prepares for their debut in the World Cup, the questions around their performance and capability against the best teams in North America remain a discussion for another day. For now, they can bask in the euphoria of achievement, shedding years of disappointment in the process.

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* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/football/2025/jun/06/uzbekistan-qualify-first-world-cup-asias-chokers), [[2]](https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/uzbekistan-savour-sweet-taste-success-after-sealing-world-cup-spot-2025-06-06/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/football/2025/jun/06/uzbekistan-qualify-first-world-cup-asias-chokers), [[3]](https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/uzbekistan-qualify-world-cup-first-time-after-draw-with-uae-2025-06-05/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/uzbekistan-savour-sweet-taste-success-after-sealing-world-cup-spot-2025-06-06/), [[5]](https://www.presstv.co.uk/Detail/2025/03/25/745037/Iran-qualifies-for-2026-World-Cup-after-Uzbekistan-draw), [[6]](https://one.uz/en/news/sports/1737-2-ochko-yetarli-3-ochko-kam-ozbekistonning-mundialga-chiqish-imkoniyati.html)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2025/jun/06/uzbekistan-qualify-first-world-cup-asias-chokers> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/uzbekistan-savour-sweet-taste-success-after-sealing-world-cup-spot-2025-06-06/> - Uzbekistan has secured its first-ever qualification for the FIFA World Cup, earning a spot in the expanded 48-team 2026 tournament. This historic achievement came with a 0-0 draw against the United Arab Emirates, ensuring a top-two finish in Group A alongside Iran. Coach Timur Kapadze praised his team’s determination and hard work throughout the demanding qualification journey. Uzbekistan had previously failed to qualify for the World Cup on seven occasions since gaining independence in 1991, including near-misses in the 2006 and 2014 qualifiers. The Uzbekistan Football Association's investments in youth development have paid off, with emerging talents like 21-year-old Manchester City defender Abdukodir Khusanov playing a key role. Kapadze, a former national team player and Olympic coach, took over the team in January following the departure of Srecko Katanec due to illness. He emphasized the pressure and responsibility felt by the squad but credited their resilience and unity for the success. Following the achievement, Kapadze received heartfelt congratulations from President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who commended the team’s character and professionalism in overcoming strong Asian competition.
3. <https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/uzbekistan-qualify-world-cup-first-time-after-draw-with-uae-2025-06-05/> - Uzbekistan has qualified for the World Cup finals for the first time in its history after securing a 0-0 draw against the United Arab Emirates in a match held in Abu Dhabi. This marks their qualification on their eighth attempt. The crucial point from the draw ensures their progression from Asian Group A, joining Iran who had already secured qualification. Goalkeeper Utkir Yusupov played a pivotal role in the result, making three vital saves in the second half to help secure the historic achievement for Uzbekistan.
4. <https://www.reuters.com/sports/soccer/uzbekistan-jordan-eye-world-cup-berths-south-korea-close-finals-2025-06-03/> - As the 2026 World Cup in North America approaches, Uzbekistan and Jordan are targeting historic first-time qualifications. Uzbekistan, under Timur Kapadze, only need a draw against the United Arab Emirates in Abu Dhabi to secure their spot. Jordan can clinch their berth with a win over Oman. South Korea, aiming for their 11th consecutive appearance, require just a single point from their game against Iraq in Basra. Japan and Iran have already qualified as group winners. The Asian confederation has eight guaranteed spots, with third and fourth-placed teams progressing to further qualification rounds. Uzbekistan currently sit second in Group A behind Iran and ahead of the UAE. In Group B, South Korea lead with 16 points, while Iraq and Jordan compete for second place. Oman must beat Jordan to stay in contention. Meanwhile, Australia face Japan in Group C; despite Japan’s confirmed qualification, Australia need favorable results to guarantee progression, depending also on Saudi Arabia’s game against Bahrain. The final qualifiers will determine which teams advance directly and which must play additional matches for the remaining spots.
5. <https://www.presstv.co.uk/Detail/2025/03/25/745037/Iran-qualifies-for-2026-World-Cup-after-Uzbekistan-draw> - Iran has qualified for the World Cup finals for the seventh time with a 2-2 draw against Uzbekistan in Tehran. Mehdi Taremi scored twice before more than 36,000 spectators at the Azadi Stadium on Tuesday, helping Iran join Japan as the second team to qualify from Asia. The Inter Milan striker scored his second goal in the 83rd minute in Tehran, giving Iran the point it needed to qualify to a fourth straight appearance at the World Cup and a seventh overall. Uzbekistan, two points behind Iran in Group A with two games remaining, would have qualified for the first time with a victory and twice took the lead.
6. <https://one.uz/en/news/sports/1737-2-ochko-yetarli-3-ochko-kam-ozbekistonning-mundialga-chiqish-imkoniyati.html> - The qualifying stage for the 2026 World Cup in Asia has entered its intense phase. The We Global Football publication assessed the chances of national teams to qualify for the tournament in the Americas and rated Uzbekistan's chances of reaching the World Cup at 92.6 percent. From an external perspective, everything seems simple. If Uzbekistan wins its next three matches, it will qualify for the World Cup for the first time in history. But what is the actual situation, is everything as easy as we think? Let's take a look at the chances of Temur Kapadze's team. First, let's take a look at the standings in the tournament table. After the 7th round, Iran is leading Group A. Currently, the Persians have secured a 99 percent chance of qualifying for the World Cup with 19 points.
7. <https://m.kun.uz/en/news/2024/11/22/uzbekistan-among-top-asian-contenders-for-direct-world-cup-berth> - Earlier results also played a critical role. A 3-2 victory over Kyrgyzstan in the second round increased their chances from 70.3% to 75.9%, while a goalless draw with Iran in the third round pushed probabilities from 75.9% to 82.8%. Uzbekistan is currently second in Group A with 13 points, trailing Iran, which leads with 16 points. Among all Asian teams, Japan, Iran, and South Korea hold the top three spots with nearly guaranteed qualification probabilities: 100%, 99.6%, and 99.2%, respectively. Despite tough competition, Uzbekistan remains well-positioned, outpacing strong teams such as Australia (79.2%) and Iraq (77.9%) in the qualification race. Uzbekistan will host Kyrgyzstan in Tashkent on March 20, aiming to further bolster their position in Group A. With 8.5 spots allocated to Asia for the 2026 FIFA World Cup, the top two teams from each group will directly qualify, while the remaining spots will be contested through playoffs. The FIFA World Cup 2026, set to take place in 16 cities across the United States, Canada, and Mexico, will feature an expanded format with 48 teams. Scheduled from June 11 to July 19, the tournament offers Asian teams a record number of qualification spots, heightening the stakes in the ongoing qualifiers.