



Iraq hopes for an upset at the 2026 World Cup

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Ali Al-Hamadi of Iraq, who also plays for Ipswich, will start during the FIFA World Cup 2026 Play-Off

Forty years after its sole [World Cup](#) appearance, Iraq returns to the world stage carrying the dreams of an entire generation that never experienced Mexico 1986.

Between memories of the past and aspirations for the future, the [Lions of Mesopotamia](#) enter the 2026 World Cup with ambitions that go beyond simply making an appearance. The squad hopes to prove their return was no fluke and that Iraqi soccer is capable of regaining its place among the elite.

Qualifying for the World Cup was a historic milestone that brought the team back to the forefront of international football after many years of challenges. The question that arises today is: will Iraq be content with simply fulfilling the dream of a comeback or does it possess enough quality to pull off an upset in the tournament?

Iraq's new generation carries a heavy legacy

Iraq enters the 2026 World Cup with a [squad that blends experience and ambition](#) led by a number of players who have gained significant professional experience both within and outside Asia.

Ayman Hussein, the striker who has become the team's offensive icon, leads the way alongside Zidan Iqbal, who brings technical flair to the midfield and enhances the team's ability to retain possession and build attacks.

The national team also boasts promising young players such as Youssef Amin, Ali Jassim, and Mirhas Doski—names that represent the generation on which Iraqis are counting to lead a new era of development. This group is characterised by speed, energy and a desire to prove themselves on the world's biggest football stage.

Nevertheless, limited World Cup experience remains one of the biggest challenges facing Iraq. Its players will face levels of pressure and competition they have never experienced before, against teams accustomed to competing for the title in every World Cup, such as France.

New World Cup format could give an advantage

The new World Cup format gives emerging teams greater opportunities to compete for spots in the knockout stages, which could work in Iraq's favor. The gaps between teams are no longer what they were in past decades, and the ability to organise and maintain tactical discipline has become a decisive factor in achieving results.

Realistically speaking, advancing past the group stage would be an unprecedented historic achievement for Iraq, which has never won a single match in its only previous appearance in 1986. Reaching round 16 or beyond, however, will require an exceptional performance and the ability to capitalise on small details against more experienced teams.

But what gives Iraq hope is its competitive spirit, which it has consistently demonstrated in continental tournaments.

More than just participation

Iraqis do not view the 2026 World Cup merely as a soccer tournament but as a national event with implications that extend far beyond the pitch. The national team, which has become a symbol of unity and hope at many historic junctures, enters the tournament representing the aspirations of millions of fans who have waited decades for this moment.

Iraq may not be among the favorites to win the title, but its presence in the World Cup alone confirms the return of Iraqi soccer to the international stage. Between the dream of advancing to the second round and the ambition to pull off another upset, Iraq has a chance to write a new chapter in their soccer history.

Iraq kicks off its World Cup campaign against Norway on 16 June, before facing France on 22 June. Players will wrap up the group stage against Senegal – the 2018 World Cup champions and one of Africa's strongest teams. The inclusion of [Norway](#), led by star [Erling Haaland](#), also makes this one of the tournament's toughest groups.

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