



## Iraq cancels league as it plans for Qatar 2022 battle with Iran

Inside world football - The Iraq Football Association, under the control of a FIFA normalisation committee, has called an end to the current Iraqi Premier League season, saying that it needed "preserve the readiness" of national team players for the World Cup qualifiers.

Iraq currently tops its group in the second round of 2022 World Cup qualification with 11 points, followed by Bahrain on 9 points and Iran, who have a game in hand, on 6 points. Iraq has three games to play and will be expected to beat Hong Kong and Cambodia, with their crunch game coming against Iran.

Only group winners are guaranteed entry to the final stages of World Cup qualification, with the top 12 going through to play off in two groups of six - each team playing each other in their group home and away. The top two in each of these groups qualify for Qatar 2022 with the third placed team playing off for a further chance to qualify for Qatar 2022 against a challenger from another confederation (most likely Concacaf). Iraq's normalisation committee said the decision to end the league with immediate effect was motivated by the need to "preserve the readiness of the national team players who have to be prepared for the resumption of the FIFA World Cup qualifiers."

But quite when they will be able to play these

qualification games is unknown.

The AFC had been hoping that the international games can be squeezed in before Christmas with FIFA potentially adding extra international dates in December. However, with national teams by then not having played competitively for almost a year, there is a reluctance to make a new international windows competition dates with a preference towards allowing teams to play friendlies to prepare for the serious business of the qualifiers.

The qualifiers look most likely to have to shift to new and yet to be specified FIFA international match dates in January 2021. And all of this assumes that international borders and quarantine restriction are relaxed enough to enable teams to travel and play.

There is further calendar pressure with domestic leagues across Asia reactivating. Confederations have generally been cognisant of the need for member federations to get their home leagues moving again and reactivate local football infrastructures.

For the Iraqis, the normalisation committee have decided to stage a top tier tournament to start the new league season. A tournament they are describing as a "refresher". The new season itself is provisionally scheduled for a September 7 start.



## Chelsea set to beat Liverpool to 53£m signing of Timo Werner

The Guardian - Chelsea are close to signing Timo Werner after holding productive talks with the RB Leipzig forward, who is set to disappoint Liverpool by moving to Stamford Bridge for £53m.

Frank Lampard has been keen to reshape his attack since becoming Chelsea's manager last summer and has pushed for the signing of Werner, whose £53m release clause expires on 15 June. Although the club still have to conclude negotiations with Leipzig, they have offered the striker a five-year deal.

Liverpool had targeted Werner, with Jürgen Klopp telling his board the Germany international would fit in well at Anfield. However, the financial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has forced the Premier League leaders to reconsider their budget and they are yet to bid for the 24-year-old, allowing Chelsea to take control of the race to sign one of the most prolific strikers in Europe.

Chelsea, fourth in the league when it was suspended in March, were under a transfer embargo last summer and have funds available after not making signings in January.

Lampard's attacking options are also set to be improved by the arrival of the Ajax playmaker Hakim Ziyech, who will become a Chelsea player on 1 July. Ziyech finalised a £36m move from Ajax in Febru-

ary and the Moroccan will be available next season. Chelsea have also monitored Lyon's Moussa Dembélé, Bayer Leverkusen's Kai Havertz, and Borussia Dortmund's Jadon Sancho, but it is Werner who has caught Lampard's eye. The German is comfortable through the middle but his ability to work from the left would allow him to combine with Tammy Abraham, Chelsea's leading goalscorer.

Werner started at VfB Stuttgart and has impressed since joining Leipzig in 2016. He has 31 goals in all competitions this season and has helped Julian Nagelsmann's side to reach the Champions League quarter-finals.

Chelsea are also in the market for a left-back, with Lampard a huge admirer of Leicester's Ben Chilwell. If Chilwell proves too expensive, Chelsea could turn their attention to Ajax's Nicolás Tagliafico.

Unlike the deals for Werner and Ziyech, Chilwell's deal is complicated due to the absence of a release clause. Therefore, the club need to negotiate a fee with Leicester in order to bring him to Stamford Bridge next season.

Manchester United's deal for Harry Maguire has set a precedent in this regard and Chilwell will likely cost over £80m (\$100m). Leicester, however, haven't put a price tag on their key asset who they intend to keep.



## Barcelona confirm Messi injury but calm any long-term fitness fears

Goal - The Catalan giants have revealed that the Argentine superstar is nursing a thigh complaint, but should be ready for the resumption of La Liga action.

Barcelona have revealed that Lionel Messi is nursing a thigh complaint, but have sought to calm any fears that the Argentine could be sidelined for a prolonged period of time.

Speculation regarding the 32-year-old's fitness first surfaced when he became a notable absentee from training sessions in Catalunya.

It was suggested at the time that Messi was merely working away from the cameras in individual gym sessions.

Barca are, however, now prepared to acknowledge that the six-time Ballon d'Or winner is carrying a slight injury.

The Spanish champions are confident, though, that their talismanic captain will soon return to full training with the rest of Quique Setien's squad and be ready for the resumption of La Liga action.

The Blaugrana have, along with the rest of the sporting world, been in a state of lockdown since the middle of March.

Niggling knocks were always likely as physical activity was stepped back up, with highly-rated teenager Ansu Fati another of those currently being

forced to work away from the main group.

Barca said in a statement released on the club's official website: "Quique Setien and his team were back out on the training ground this Friday after taking the previous day off.

"Barca captain Leo Messi has a minor right quadriceps injury and trained in isolation, doing specific exercises to avoid unnecessary risks with just eight days remaining before Barca finally get back to playing matches. He should be able to rejoin his team-mates in a few days' time.

"All of the available players were at the Ciutat Esportiva, where they were joined by Jorge Cuenca and Kike Saverio as well as the other B team players who have been working out with the first team over the last few days: Inaki Pena, R. Araujo, Chumi, Monchu, Riqui Puig, Collado and Ansu Fati. The latter, like Messi, worked out individually this morning.

"For tomorrow's Saturday session the players will train again, but unusually, this session is going to be on the pitch in the Camp Nou as Setien works to get his players ready for the return to football, but with games being played behind closed doors." Barcelona, who hold a two-point lead over Clasico rivals Real Madrid at the top of the Liga table, have been out of action since March 7.