

# Portugal look to Ronaldo

Reuters | Saransk, Russia

Cristiano Ronaldo has scored Portugal's all-four goals in the World Cup so far and the European Champions will be heavily dependent on the talismanic forward to see them through against a stoic Iran side in their final Group B match today.

Ronaldo's hat-trick in the 3-3 draw against Spain gave Portugal a vital point while an early headed strike, which made him Europe's all-time top international goal scorer, against Morocco proved enough to bring home three points.

Portugal and Spain, who take on already ousted Morocco, are on four points and need a draw from their respective matches. But Iran are a point behind with three and must beat Portugal to progress.

The European sides will not only aim for victory but will also try to outscore each other with the top spot in the group set to be decided on goal difference.

The 33-year-old Real Madrid forward's individual brilliance has glossed over Portugal's dour performances in their first two matches and Fernando Santos's side have mostly appeared like a one-man team.

In 26 matches competitive matches since Santos took over in September 2014, Portugal have won 20 and lost twice, with one of those being a penalty shootout defeat by Chile in the 2017 Confederations Cup. Of those 20 wins, 10 have been by a single goal and most of the others were against weaker opponents.

**37** **Iran**

**Nickname | The Three Lions**

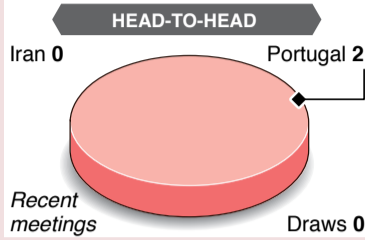
**Possible line-ups:** Beiranvand, Rezaeian, Pouraliganji, Hosseini, Hajsafi, Ezatollahi, Ebrahimi, Amiri, Ansarifard, Taremi, Azmoun

Iran were desperately unlucky not to get a point from their match against Spain and are not expected to make wholesale changes here. Alireza Jahanbakhsh was only fit enough for a place on the bench last time out, but should start here if he can overcome injury in time. Omid Ebrahimi overcame injury to start against Spain and he will retain his place in the team in Iran's last group game. Roozbeh Cheshmi is expected to miss out, however.



Sardar Azmoun

**IRN 1-0 MAR** Match 1 **POR 3-3 ESP**  
**IRN 0-1 ESP** Match 2 **POR 1-0 MAR**



**Fact box**

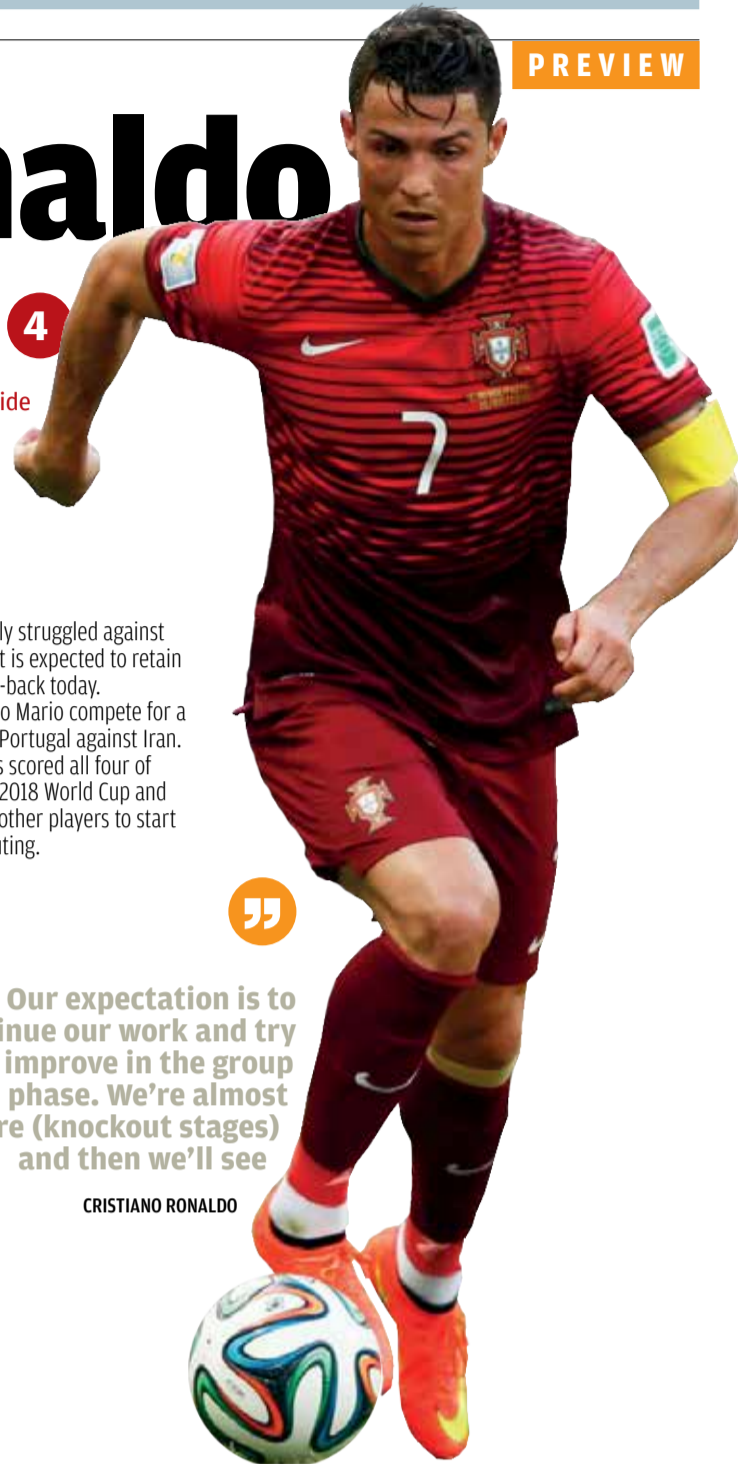
- » Iran have three points after two matches and need a shock win over Portugal to finish in the top two.
- » Portugal have four points after two matches and need to better Spain's result to secure top spot in Group B.
- » Even though Iran beat Morocco, Portugal have the easier final group game and should be confident of finishing top.

**Portugal** **4**

**Nickname | The Red Tide**

**Possible line-ups:** Patricio, Soares, Pepe, Fonte, Guerreiro, Moutinho, Carvalho, B. Silva, Mario, Ronaldo, A. Silva

Raphael Guerreiro really struggled against Morocco last time out but is expected to retain his place at left-back today. Bruno Fernandes and Joao Mario compete for a spot on the left wing for Portugal against Iran. Cristiano Ronaldo has scored all four of Portugal's goals at the 2018 World Cup and Fernando Santos needs other players to start contributing.



”

Our expectation is to continue our work and try to improve in the group phase. We're almost there (knockout stages) and then we'll see

CRISTIANO RONALDO

# Spain count on Costa goals

Reuters | Kaliningrad, Russia

Spain will be looking for their unlikely new World Cup figure-head Diego Costa to strike again against already eliminated Morocco today as they bid to outscore Portugal and grab top spot in Group B.

A draw in Ka-

liningrad would guarantee the 2010 winners safe passage into the last 16 but to be assured of winning the group they need to win a scoring contest with Portugal, who play Iran at the same time.

If the two European sides win by the same scoreline, top spot will be determined by who has the cleaner disciplinary record, with Spain currently on one yellow card to Portugal's two.

Iran, however, would reach the last 16 if they sprang a surprise by beating the European champions.

Costa has scored three of Spain's

four goals in Russia, emerging as a surprise talisman after the sacking of coach Julen Lopetegui threatened to throw their campaign into chaos.

Brazilian-born Costa had flopped at the 2014 World Cup after switching loyalties to Spain, failing to have a single shot in two games as the holders were dumped out.

He was left out of the Euro 2016 squad and his return had been a constant subject of debate in Spain, with leading newspaper El Pais questioning his suitability in a team which prioritises possession.



Diego Costa

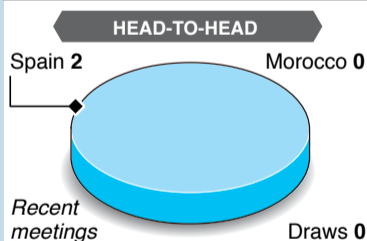
Fernando Hierro surprisingly picked Lucas Vazquez for Spain's mediocre 1-0 win over Iran last time out but the Real Madrid forward didn't grasp his opportunity. Daniel Carvajal proved his fitness in time against Iran and will keep his spot at right-back today. Hierro may revert back to a 4-3-3 formation against Morocco, with Thiago making his first start of the 2018 World Cup.

**10** **Spain**

**Nickname | La Roja (The Red)**

**Possible line-ups:** De Gea, Carvajal, Pique, Ramos, Alba, Koke, Busquets, Iniesta, Silva, Isco, Costa

**ESP 3-3 POR** Match 1 **MAR 0-1 IRN**  
**ESP 1-0 IRN** Match 2 **MAR 0-1 POR**



**Fact box**

- » Spain have four points from their opening two matches and need to better Portugal's result today to secure top spot.
- » Morocco have played great football over their two matches and deserve more than their current total of 0 points.
- » Spain haven't looked convincing over their two matches but are favourites to beat Morocco. Portugal face Iran in the group's other game and will be expected to outscore Spain today.

**Morocco** **41**

**Nickname | Lions of the Atlas**

**Possible line-ups:** Mohamedi, Dirar, Benatia, da Costa, Hakimi, El Ahmadi, Boussoufa, Amrabat, Belhanda, Ziyech, El Kaabi

Morocco have played some great football at the 2018 World Cup but have 0 points to show for it and have already been knocked out. Nabil Dirar and Nordin Amrabat both overcame injuries to feature against Portugal last time out. Amine Harit will hope to start Morocco's last match after dropping to the bench in the 1-0 defeat against the Euro 2016 winners. Khalid Boutaib and Ayoub El Kaabi compete for a starting spot up front for the African side.

”

We have to be faithful to the end to the style of play that defines us. We have to play, pass a lot, keep the ball. If we play quickly across the pitch the chances will come

SPAIN MIDFIELDER ISCO

# Saudi, Egypt fight to avoid last place

**67** **Saudi Arabia**

**Nickname | The Falcons**



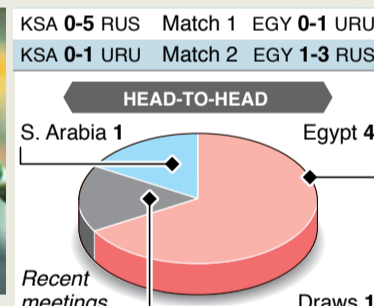
Mohammad al-Sahlawi

**Egypt** **45**

**Nickname | The Pharaohs**



Mohamed Salah



Saudi Arabia improved on their opening day 5-0 crushing at the hands of hosts Russia with a 1-0 loss to Uruguay. They are already out of the tournament but will likely persist with the 4-2-3-1 formation they used last time out.

**Possible line-ups:** Al-Owais, Al Burayk, Hawsawi, Abdulayhi, Al Shahrani, Al Jassim, Otayf, Babhir, Al Faraj, Al Dawsari, Al Sahlawi

**Possible line-ups:** El Shenawy, Ibrahim, Gabr, Hegazi, Abdul Shafy, Elneny, Hamed, Salah, Bekhit, Hassan, Kahraba

# Russia ride wave of euphoria into game

**14** **Uruguay**

**Nickname | The Sky Blue**



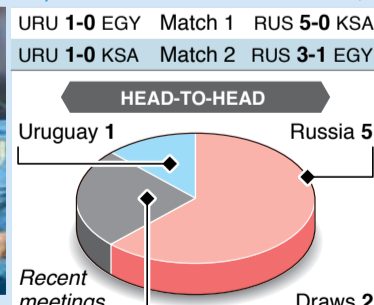
Luis Suarez

**Russia** **70**

**Nickname | Sbornaya**



Denis Cheryshev



Uruguay have won both of their opening matches but have been dire in both. Oscar Tabarez needs to change but it remains to be seen whether he is willing to.

**Possible line-ups:** Muslera, Varela, Gimenez, Godin, Caceres, Vecino, Bentancur, Nandez, Arrascaeta, Suarez, Cavani

Alan Dzagoev suffered a hamstring injury in Russia's opener and is not expected to recover in time to feature in their last group game.

**Possible line-ups:** El Shenawy, Ibrahim, Gabr, Hegazi, Abdul Shafy, Elneny, Hamed, Salah, Bekhit, Hassan, Kahraba