

FIFA World Cup 2026

Geopolitical tensions at play off the pitch

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OPINION

The mantra of the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA), soccer's global governing body, is famously that "football unites the world." But this summer's men's World Cup is set to kick off with both sports and geopolitical tensions on display. This is the first World Cup to be hosted by three nations: the United States, Canada, and Mexico. The United States' relations with its two neighbors, however, have strained during the second Trump administration over trade, immigration, and border policies — marking a dramatic shift since the three countries initially planned to cohost back in 2017. Amnesty International warned that the United States' new hardline immigration and border policies could affect fans and players from competing countries. US military actions abroad, particularly in Iran, have also raised tensions. As for signs of how rapidly the situation could evolve, the administration waived a \$15,000 visa bond affecting fans from five African countries only weeks before the tournament's start. And amid the ongoing Iran war, FIFA permitted the Iranian national team to move their base camp from the

as the 2028 Summer Olympics, so the administration said that athletes, coaches, and support staff for those tournaments — among a select few other sporting events — would be exempt from such restrictions. The State Department clarified that "only a small subset of travelers" would qualify for the exemption, suggesting that fans and foreign spectators, media, and corporate sponsors from countries restricted by the Trump administration's travel policies could be excluded. Four countries whose teams have qualified for the World Cup fall under Trump's travel ban: Haiti and Iran face full entry bans, while the Ivory Coast and Senegal face partial restrictions. Fans from those countries will be unable to attend World Cup games hosted by the United States unless they are also US residents or dual nationals with countries not on the travel ban list.

Many other qualified countries are on the Trump administration's visa pause list, including Egypt, Ghana, Jordan, Morocco, Uruguay, and Uzbekistan, which only applies to immigration visas. "That shouldn't stop fans from those countries from getting tourist visas," explained CFR immigration expert Edward Alden, "but you can certainly expect that anybody coming from those countries is going to face an extra level of scrutiny." For fans who clear the legal entry

travelers. High costs, intense application processes, and bans aside, Alden suggested another barrier could be psychological: "Are people going to be scared to enter the United States?"



The Iran squad and staff stand in front of a giant poster that depicts them performing a military salute, during a farewell ceremony in Tehran before their departure for the 2026 World Cup.
● ATTA KENARE/AFP

Obadare noted that the 2026 World Cup will be monumental because it features a record 10 teams from African countries. However, many African fans with visas to enter the United States chose to make other arrangements. "They're saying there's something about this atmosphere — 'I don't want to get to an airport and then have to explain myself for three hours and then somebody says, can I see your phone?'" Obadare said. "So, they're giving the United States a wide berth and going to Canada or Mexico." Another consequence of the travel restrictions could play out in the psychology of the games themselves, Obadare contended. "There's something about having your fans in the stadium, rooting for you, shouting their heads off," he said, remembering when fans from his home country, Nigeria, flocked to Atlanta for the 1994 Olympics. "If you don't have those people in the stands, it's not the same thing."

What about safety at the tournament?

Several aspects of the games are under scrutiny when it comes to perceived threats to safety:

• **Venues.** Security during major sporting events is always a concern. That's particularly true for this year's World Cup, which is the largest version of the tournament ever held. The US government has awarded \$846 million in grants to nine US host states to shore up cybersecurity, emergency response preparedness, security, and drone protection across the 11 US host cities. Intelligence briefings from US officials and FIFA obtained by Reuters warned on March 20 that the potential for extremist attacks on the games, fan events, or transportation infrastructure — as well as civil unrest — had grown because of heightened tensions over Trump's immigration poli-

cies and the war in Iran. Meanwhile, cartel violence in Mexico disrupted one planned host stadium in the months before the tournament began. When a Mexican operation assisted by US intelligence assassinated the drug lord El Mencho in February, chaos erupted in Guadalajara as organized crime groups set fire to public infrastructure and attacked vehicles on the roads. The unrest affected tourism in the area. No significant safety concerns have emerged about host stadiums or cities in Canada.

• **Enforcement.** Questions have swirled about the role that US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), an arm of DHS, could play in the tournament since the agency announced in February that it planned to play a "key part" in World Cup security. That might concern some participating countries. Germany and the United Kingdom have discouraged US travel due to DHS enforcement, while Ecuador has condemned ICE immigration raids. Meanwhile, Italian officials objected when the United States planned to send ICE to help with enforcement at Milan's Winter Olympics in February amid the agency's aggressive crackdowns in Minnesota. Democratic lawmakers introduced three bills in March aimed at limiting immigration enforcement at the World Cup over safety concerns for attendees and travelers. However, none are expected to pass the Republican-controlled US Congress in time for the tournament's start. The prospect of an ICE presence



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Protesters in Washington, the US, demonstrate in December 2025 against the involvement of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) personnel in the 2026 men's World Cup.
● FRANCIS CHUNG/POLITICO



at the World Cup has galvanized some venue workers. On May 29, the union representing 2,000 hospitality workers at Los Angeles' SoFi stadium — which is set to hold eight World Cup matches — broke off negotiations with stadium operators over a contract to improve working conditions and keep ICE out of the venue grounds. SoFi union workers said they would vote on formalizing a strike.

Alden believes ICE does not have a reason to be at the games. "World Cup fans are not likely overstayers, for the most part," he said. "This is a world-stage event, and I don't think that it would make sense to disrupt it with a heavy ICE presence."

• **Player safety.** Concerns about player safety have largely derived from the ongoing Iran war. After initially threatening a "boycott" of the United States games due to security concerns, Iran reached an agreement to move its team's base camp from the US state of Arizona to Tijuana, Mexico, in order to reduce the amount of time the Iranian team spent on US soil. Yet even after FIFA confirmed Iran would cross the border for its US matches, the logistics are coming down to the wire.

Aside from heated sentiments, the actual temperature could be another player-safety issue. Several host cities, such as Los Angeles and Mexico City, are in areas that pose a high risk of heat-stress injury to players. (Other stadiums, such as those in Atlanta and Arlington, Texas, are temperature-controlled.) Last year's Club World Cup in the United States saw midafternoon kickoffs that led to heat exhaustion, raising concerns that players could face similar conditions this year.

Is there a risk of a boycott?

Discussions about boycotting this World Cup have come from soccer coaches, politicians, and civilians, including the heads of 20 European soccer federations — but none ultimately came to fruition. Although many criticize current US policies or the 2026 games, the odds of a boycott that involves countries withholding their teams remains incredibly low, Obadare said. "At the end of the day, [players] want that shot."

Boycotts from individuals or fan groups are more likely. Some people have reportedly sold their tickets, though the Los Angeles Times reported in early February that FIFA stood to gain from these transactions by taking a 15 percent fee from both the sellers and buyers.

Boycotts have certainly swirled around World Cup games before. In 1964, more than a dozen African teams withdrew from the tournament in protest of FIFA's regional qualification policies.

What is FIFA's stance?

FIFA policies include human rights guidelines in line with the United Nations, and require World Cup host countries to do the same.

The 2026 games were the first to have human rights criteria embedded in the bidding process, and each host city published a plan declaring the ways it would promote human rights. Atlanta pledged to raise hourly worker wages for the tournament to



The map shows the many countries in the 2026 men's World Cup that face US travel or visa restrictions. Restrictions include the travel ban, the pause in immigrant visa processing, and the requirement of a visa bond.
● FIFA/CFR

United States to Mexico. While FIFA confirmed that the team would cross the US border to play their scheduled group-stage matches, the players were still awaiting their visas in the days ahead of the June 11 opening.

The United States is set to host roughly three-quarters — 78 of 104 — of the World Cup matches in eleven US cities. Canada and Mexico will each host thirteen games across two and three cities, respectively. Given the geopolitical tensions surrounding the tournament, onlookers are questioning how this World Cup — which is expected to attract more than one million international visitors — will actually play out.

"I don't think this is going to be as smooth as previous World Cups," CFR Africa expert Ebenezer Obadare said.

Earlier this year, the Trump administration enacted a travel ban that fully or partially bars citizens from 39 countries from entering the United States. It has steadily added travel restrictions, including halting immigrant visa processing for 75 countries. The United States is hosting the men's World Cup this year as well

barriers to attend US games, another hurdle is cost. Aside from this year's games having the most expensive tickets of any cup so far, the Iran war caused airline prices to soar, and non-immigrant visa holders from five participating countries — Algeria, Cape Verde, the Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Tunisia — expected to face a \$15,000 bond requirement to attend matches on US soil. In mid-May, the US government waived the requirement for fans from those five countries who had purchased tournament tickets as of mid-April.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) could also ramp up screenings for visitors from countries not affected by current travel restrictions. One proposal would require applicants from 42 countries — including close US partners — to hand over troves of online data, though it remains unfinalized just a week before the tournament's opening. US Customs and Border Protection confirmed in May that the new rule likely would not be finalized until later this year, but the agency planned to conduct more targeted social media screenings of select