

\$17.50, Dallas committed to looking out for human trafficking, and Vancouver outlined a “zero-tolerance” policy for “all acts of discrimination,” among others. Yet Amnesty International issued a report in late March that said there was a “human rights emergency” in the United States, characterized by abusive immigration and border policies, as well as incursions on freedom of speech and assembly. Human Rights Watch said in a report in late April that “all but one” host city committee had either failed to produce the required human rights action plans, or produced plans failing to adequately address human rights risks. FIFA and tournament hosts have come under scrutiny before. At the 2025 Club World Cup, FIFA canceled long-standing antidiscrimination messaging despite instances of fans chanting slurs. During the 2022 Qatar World Cup, protesters were removed from games for speaking out on various issues,

while migrant workers who built infrastructure for the games died because of unsafe working conditions. Worker deaths were also reported in the buildup to prior World Cups hosted by Russia, Brazil, and South Africa. FIFA is unlikely to offend a host nation by speaking out. Obadare noted that the World Cup brings in nearly all of the organization’s income, with the Qatar games in 2022 bringing in 83 percent of FIFA’s revenue from the four-year cycle following the 2018 games. According to Amnesty International, this year’s tournament is expected to be the most lucrative to date, raking in up to \$11 billion.

Are there other geopolitical issues surrounding the games?
Trump has discussed the World Cup’s potential for sports diplomacy, while the State Department’s “Sports Diplomacy Playbook” — seen by Politico — maps out how Washington could lever-



age the event to advance foreign investment and soft policy aims. Trump also expressed interest last year in revoking a ban on Russia playing in the World Cup, which had been implemented after its 2022 attack on Ukraine, though the ban was ultimately upheld. Meanwhile, calls for Israel to be banned over its war in Gaza looked set to be ignored, with the State Department confirm-

ing it would “work to fully stop any effort” to ban Israel. (Israel ultimately did not qualify for the tournament.) On a lighter note, four teams are stepping onto World Cup grass for the first time ever: Cape Verde, Curaçao, Jordan, and Uzbekistan. With those four debutants and the expanded 48-team format, there will likely be several games involving two teams that have



US President Donald Trump (L) is presented with the inaugural FIFA Peace Prize by FIFA President Gianni Infantino during the 2026 FIFA World Cup draw at the Kennedy Center in Washington, the US, on December 5, 2025.

● EVAN VUCCI/AP

never played each other before, providing new arenas to watch for both friendly competition and displays of soft power. In practical terms, FIFA organizers will be taking notes on the first-ever jointly hosted tournament among the North American neighbors. This year is a test case for the shared hosting model, with the 2030 World Cup set to be split among Morocco, Portugal, and Spain. Although this year’s hosts have pledged to work together, Canada and Mexico have seen their bilateral ties with the United States change significantly during Trump’s second term. Their disputes over trade, immigration, and other issues could underscore the effect that geopolitics has on the games. Given all the dynamics set to unfold, the World Cup could “be a different tournament” this year, according to Obadare.

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Five flashpoints that could plunge Trump’s World Cup into chaos

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PERSPECTIVE

Donald Trump has taken unprecedented control of the 2026 Fifa World Cup, with a White House task force he personally chairs and centralised planning via the Department of Homeland Security. International fans seeking to cheer on their country on football’s biggest stage have encountered last-minute visa cancellations, fluctuating ticket prices and all-out travel bans as they attempt to embark on increasingly expensive journeys to North America from around the globe. Meanwhile, American citizens living abroad who wish to return for the event say they are afraid to book travel to the US, fearing past comments on social media could lead to them being denied entry. Here are all the main flashpoints that could plunge the US President’s World Cup into chaos, from confusion over border checks to nationwide travel bans.

Border check crackdown

Border checks have been ramping up in recent months, with Britons reporting that they have been subjected to long interviews at US airports. Some have even been detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for minor visa violations. Initially, the administration wanted those travelling to the US to reveal five years of their social media history when applying to the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA), an automated visa system for US tourism or business. However, following widespread backlash from the tourism industry and fan representative groups like Football Supporters Europe, this policy was abandoned. US officials have warned fans that even with tickets and visas, World Cup entry is not guaranteed. Supporters can be turned away from the border and risk losing thousands of pounds. Last year, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said that although having a World Cup ticket can fast-track a US visa under a new scheme, it



Iran’s defender Ehsan Haji Safi (front) and teammates walk on the tarmac after arriving at the Tijuana International Airport in Tijuana, Mexico, on June 7, 2026, ahead of the FIFA 2026 World Cup. All of the matches of the Iranian national football team are set to take place in the US.

● AFP

“doesn’t guarantee your entry to the US”. Fifa boss Gianni Infantino promised the world will be welcomed to the United States for the quadrennial sporting spectacle, co-hosted by Canada and Mexico. But Andrea Florence, executive director of the Sport & Rights Alliance, said that Trump’s “harsh anti-human rights rhetoric, aggressive immigration policies, and mass deportation raids have already cast a dark shadow over the world’s biggest sporting event”.

Last-minute travel cancellations

Some British fans have secured authorisation to travel to the US, only to be left devastated after it was withdrawn at the last minute with no clear explanation. The BBC reported that two brothers from Scotland had their ESTA revoked on June 3 despite it being approved last December, saying they were now not allowed to travel. “I don’t think it’s fair, they shouldn’t authorise somebody to go then take it back,” one of the brothers told the broadcaster. “We didn’t book anything until we were authorised.” Much of the screening process is automated, leaving fans in the

dark about why decisions are made — or how to challenge them.

Fans who are not eligible for the ESTA scheme, including those who have travelled to restricted countries such as North Korea or Iran, may face months-long delays to secure a visa.

Overlapping visa rules are also likely to cause fans some confusion. In January, citizens from 39 countries were issued with travel bans and the Trump administration suspended the processing of immigration visas from 75 countries indefinitely.

Confusion over Iran’s football team

Despite the ongoing conflict between the United States and Iran, the Iranian team and some support staff finally secured permission to enter the US on Friday, just 10 days before their opening fixture of the World Cup against New Zealand on June 15. US officials said the Iranian football team and “necessary support staff” had been granted the visas needed to compete in the tournament, adding that Iran would not be allowed to “abuse this system to sneak terrorists into the United States under false pretences”. But Iranian fans, along with those

from Haiti, are effectively blocked from supporting their teams at matches in the US after their countries were included in the travel ban in January.

Partial bans are also in place for fans from World Cup-qualified countries including Côte d’Ivoire and Senegal, meaning those who do not already have a valid visa will not be granted one until the ban is lifted. Ahead of the World Cup, Trump claimed this summer’s tournament will be “the Greatest and Safest Sporting Event in American history,” adding in a post on Truth Social: “All players, officials, and fans will be treated like the ‘STARS’ that they are!” Those comments now sit uneasily alongside growing concerns over access and travel.

Fans ‘ripped off’ by tickets

Fifa promised the World Cup would be sold out, but there are still thousands of tickets for sale across several platforms. Last week, the attorneys general of New York and New Jersey launched an investigation into Fifa’s ticket practices after allegations of “artificially inflating prices” and “misleading fans”. According to the subpoena, some fans who won tickets in the ballot

in one price category were ultimately given tickets of a lower value, with seats further away from the pitch.

And until last month, fans from 50 countries — including Algeria, Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Tunisia, which had qualified for the tournament — faced paying a \$15,000 (£11,000) visa deposit just to be allowed into the US.

The Trump administration waived the fees for World Cup visitors last month, but the last-minute policy change still risks pricing out ordinary supporters and turning the tournament into a luxury event for the wealthy.

Even Trump appeared to balk at the pricing when asked about fans having to pay \$1,000 (£736) to watch the USA’s first Group D match, telling The New York Post last month: “I did not know that number. I would certainly like to be there, but I wouldn’t pay it either, to be honest with you.”

US tourism in decline

All of these concerns are set against the backdrop of a tourism crisis in the US, with four million fewer foreign nationals visiting the country in 2025, compared to 2024.

It marked both the country’s first yearly decline since the Covid-19 pandemic and an even greater fall than was seen after the 2008 financial crash, with total tourism spending estimated to have declined by some \$8 billion (£5.9bn) compared to 2024 levels.

Critics claim that tightened visa restrictions and ICE crackdowns have led more foreigners to avoid visiting the US, even though it is co-hosting the World Cup.

Despite these concerns, the White House said in a statement that the World Cup would be “one of the greatest and most spectacular events in the history of mankind.” The tournament will feature 48 teams and 104 matches, beginning at Mexico City’s Estadio Azteca on June 11 and culminating with the final at the New York/New Jersey MetLife Stadium on July 19.

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