



Peace by Other Means?

The 2026 World Cup and the Weaponization of the 'Beautiful Game'

by Hubert Kinkoh

The 2026 World Cup kicked off in June: 48 teams, three co-hosts, and 104 matches, 78 of them staged in the United States. For billions of fans, the expanded tournament was intended to represent football's largest and most inclusive global festival. Yet its opening phase has been overshadowed by the convergence of conflict, security policy, and geopolitical signaling within the structures of the event itself. Decisions taken by the principal host – folding immigration enforcement, wartime postures, and security narratives into tournament management – have eroded the longstanding fiction that football operates as neutral ground. At the same time, the apparent unwillingness or inability of the governing body, Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), to resist or even meaningfully contest such practices has exposed deep institutional weaknesses. Although a US-Iran agreement to end their nearly four-month conflict was announced shortly after kickoff, the tournament was conceived, organized, and operationalized during an active period of host-state belligerency. That context has left a durable imprint on participation, perception, and access. The outcome is not merely the intrusion of geopolitics into sport, but its operational capture. Football is no longer simply intersecting with international politics; it is being repurposed as an instrument within it.

What happened?

Placed side by side, a pattern emerges in which access to the World Cup has been filtered through conflict dynamics and geopolitical categorization. Somali referee Omar Abdulkadir Artan – voted Confederation of African Football (CAF) referee of the year and poised to become the first Somali official at a men's World Cup – was denied entry in Miami despite holding valid travel documents, including a diplomatic passport. Iraq's vice-captain Aymen Hussein was detained for nearly seven hours upon arrival in Chicago, subjected to questioning and electronic scrutiny, while his team's photographer was refused entry entirely. South Africa's team faced a full day delay due to visa processing failures described by its Sports Minister as "grossly unfair." These incidents were not isolated administrative irregularities; they reflect a broader policy environment in which nationality, conflict affiliation, and perceived security risk override the principle of equal and predictable access. Iran's situation illustrates this most sharply: With the host country being an active belligerent until days before kickoff, Iran needed to relocate its training base to Tijuana, Mexico, after widespread visa delays affected its delegation. Iranian players have been required to commute in and out of the US on match days – an unprecedented logistical constraint for a World Cup team. Meanwhile, approximately 500 Ivorian supporters were denied visas, with US authorities reportedly signaling an intention to restrict their presence.

Public health measures have further reinforced this selective permeability. Citing an Ebola outbreak intersecting conflict zones in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), US authorities restricted travelers who had recently been in the DRC, Uganda, or South Sudan; Canada adopted similar measures. While such decisions fall within sovereign prerogatives, their application during a global sporting event underscores how epidemiological risk is filtered through geopolitical geography, amplifying disparities affecting African states.

Why does it matter?

The premise that football can function as a vehicle for peace depends on its ability to provide a neutral, rules-bound space where political conflict is suspended. That premise has now been compromised. The contradiction is particularly stark when set against FIFA's decision in December 2025 to award its inaugural Peace Prize to US President Donald Trump, citing "exceptional and extraordinary actions for peace" in a process lacking transparency and already subject to internal ethics complaints. The award followed the Nobel Peace Prize snub of Trump two months earlier, even as Trump claimed to have settled eight wars. It was handed over a day after Trump hosted Congolese and Rwandan leaders to sign a peace agreement. The award came against the backdrop of escalating tensions culminating in Operation Epic Fury, the US-Israeli military campaign against Iran that drew in regional actors including Gulf monarchies and Jordan. The war continued into the tournament preparation phase and was halted only days before kickoff. The juxtaposition is striking: a host state recognized for peace while engaged in active conflict with a tournament participant, and then imposing restrictions that materially affect the participant's ability to compete.

Even the subsequent ceasefire between Washington and Tehran does not mitigate the significance of the earlier policy environment. As hostilities exceeded 100 days, US forces maintained a naval blockade of Iran and exchanges of fire continued into early June, coinciding with the arrival of Iran's team in North America. Across that period the rhetoric between Washington and Tehran mirrored the battlefield: Iranian officials accused Washington of "obstructionism"; a US official warned against the visa system becoming a channel for smuggling terrorists; and roughly fifteen Iranian delegates were denied entry. Travel restrictions imposed during this period therefore reflect wartime logic rather than peacetime administration. The presence of Iranian players wearing "#168" pins – commemorating victims of a February strike in Minab – demonstrates how these

dynamics extend onto the field itself. FIFA's rules prohibit overt political messaging, yet such gestures occupy a grey zone that reflects institutional silence.

African participants have been particularly affected, raising broader concerns about differential treatment. US justification for exclusions, such as citing "association with suspected members of terror organizations" without disclosed evidence in Artan's case, exemplifies the risks of discretionary security framing. Artan says he was interrogated for eleven hours about a militant group he knew nothing about. When applied to accredited officials, such measures undermine confidence in FIFA's vetting processes and cast a reputational shadow over entire regions. The exclusion of a single referee thus becomes a signal affecting all delegations from similarly categorized states. Somalia is one of nearly 40 – mostly African – countries under US travel restrictions.

Responses from other institutions have further highlighted the imbalance. The Union of European Football Associations' (UEFA) decision to appoint Artan to officiate the Super Cup between Champions League winners Paris Saint-Germain and Europa League winners Aston Villa in Salzburg on 12 August, alongside FIFA's commitment to honor his World Cup remuneration, represents a symbolic counterweight. The spokesperson of the African Union Commission Chairperson publicly hailed the referee's achievement as moment for continental prestige and a proud moment for Somalia and the global sporting community – a recognition that made the US exclusion appear even more arbitrary.

What is the big picture?

These developments are not merely reactive. Instead, they expose structural deficiencies in FIFA's governance model. The organization's statutes formally commit it to internationally recognized human rights, and the 2026 World Cup was the first to include

binding human-rights requirements within its hosting framework. Yet early warnings – from watchdogs noting that US entry restrictions would exclude participants and fans – were not translated into enforceable guarantees. Instead, FIFA appears to have prioritized accommodation, reportedly framing limited pauses in immigration enforcement as public-relations measures rather than rights obligations.

The disparity between FIFA's treatment of different hosts is instructive. In the build-up to Qatar 2022, sustained scrutiny from the European parliament, Western media, and rights groups focused on labor rights, gender equality, and minority protections. By contrast, the exclusion of African and Iranian participants under a North American host has not generated equivalent mobilization. This asymmetry reflects both power realities and perceptual biases. The United States' centrality to the global economy and to FIFA's commercial strategy reduces the likelihood of confrontation as the 2026 tournament is projected to generate USD 30.5 billion in US economic output. Meanwhile normative scrutiny appears unevenly distributed between Global North and Global South hosts.

Looking ahead, the implications are magnified by FIFA's future tournament allocations. The 2030 World Cup will span six countries across three continents, including Morocco, Portugal, and Spain, with additional centenary matches in South American nations – Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay. This dispersed format multiplies exposure to border controls, visa regimes, and migration politics. Saudi Arabia's uncontested hosting of the 2034 edition extends these challenges further.

Without structural reform, the risks observed in 2026 will intensify. Access provisions for players, officials, and fans remain contingent on host-state discretion. Unless binding guarantees – paired with independent dispute-resolution mechanisms – are embedded and enforced, each tournament will be vulnerable to the geopolitical environment of its host. FIFA's credibility as a regulator depends on its willingness to apply its own standards consistently across hosts of varying political weight.

The case of Morocco illustrates how host power can shape outcomes even within sporting adjudication. Following Senegal's on-field victory in the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations, CAF's appeal board controversially awarded the title to host Morocco two months later, triggering the resignation of CAF's general secretary. It is now before the Court of Arbitration for Sport. Whether or not that decision is upheld, the perception from Miami to Rabat to Riyadh that outcomes can be reshaped off the field reinforces the broader trend: political influence increasingly permeates domains once governed by sporting rules. For African states, the implications are both symbolic and material. The continent's actors – players, officials, and supporters – are encountering the same hierarchies that shape global security policy and conflict exposure. The World Cup thus becomes another arena in which structural inequalities are reproduced.

What comes next?

At least four tests will determine whether the trajectory set in 2026 is consolidated or corrected. First, **access**: whether FIFA secures binding, enforceable guarantees for the entry and treatment of all accredited participants and supporters, or continues to rely on host assurances and ad hoc mitigation. Second, **the politics of welcome**: alternative gestures of inclusion – such as UEFA's appointment of Artan or Canada's openness to hosting excluded individuals – may evolve into competitive soft-power strategies, reframing exclusion as reputational cost for host states. Third, **protest and expression**: should symbolic acts – such as Iran's commemorative pins – move from transit spaces into stadiums, FIFA will face direct challenges to its prohibition on political messaging, forcing a clearer articulation of its position. Fourth, **accountability**: whether scrutiny applied to previous hosts is extended consistently, or remains selective, will determine the credibility of global sports governance. Football's diplomatic value rests on the perception of neutrality. When entry is restricted by

nationality, when matches are staged amid active conflict involving participants, and when governance bodies fail to enforce their own standards, that neutrality is not merely weakened – it is expended. For practitioners of diplomacy, particularly in regions such as West Asia and Africa where sport has often served as a low-risk channel for engagement, the lesson is clear: the instruments of soft power are being reshaped by the very geopolitical forces they were meant to mitigate. The fragile ceasefire that follows the US-Iran conflict may temporarily reduce immediate tensions, but it does not address the structural conditions that enabled their spillover into the tournament. Those conditions are already embedded in the planning cycles for 2030 and 2034. In that sense, the 2026 World Cup is less an anomaly than a warning. A peace prize awarded under these circumstances does not resolve the contradiction between sport and statecraft. It formalizes it.

About the author

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