

FIFA 2026: Politics, Power, and the Neutrality Challenge

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2026 World Cup opens on 11 June. Politics is shaping it directly. Iran, a qualifying nation, is participating amid active hostilities involving the principal host state. The president of FIFA faces a formal ethics complaint during the tournament. The principal host state bars fans from several qualifying nations. This report examines five political dimensions: US soft power, Iran's wartime participation, FIFA's institutional consistency, the conduct of the presidency, and immigration exclusion. It also reads the public conversation around the tournament, drawn from large-scale social-listening monitoring. The finding is simple. Political themes are now built into the tournament. They sit alongside genuine football enthusiasm, which is still the larger conversation. The question is not whether politics shapes the 2026 World Cup. It is how the institutions handle 39 days in which sport and politics cannot be separated.

II. BACKGROUND: THE NEUTRALITY DOCTRINE AND ITS LIMITS

FIFA holds that sport stands above politics. The claim is a source of authority more than a description of conduct. World Cups have always been political, from Argentina 1978 to Russia 2018 and Qatar 2022, and scholars treat the 2026 edition as political in degree, not in kind (IPSA, 2026; Balsillie School, 2026). What is new in 2026 is reach. The politics touches the mechanics of the event: a team's base camp moved across a border, fans barred by nationality, an ethics complaint live during play. FIFA's defenders are right that the body does not start wars or write immigration law. The question here is narrower. Where have FIFA's own decisions been consistent with its stated principles, and where have they not.

III. FIVE POLITICAL DIMENSIONS

1. Soft power: the host's self-defeating paradox

In Joseph Nye's term, is influence won through attraction and legitimacy, not force (Nye, 2004). It explains what the United States wants from hosting and the problem it now has. Washington treats the tournament as a foreign-policy asset, and analysts argued before kick-off that it would be about more than commercial return (Chadwick, 2026; CFR, 2026). But attraction needs openness, and the same administration has narrowed entry: travel restrictions on fans from qualifying nations, a visa-bond requirement on travellers from five qualified countries, and a documented climate of concern across host cities (American Immigration Council, 2026; Amnesty International, 2026). The return cannot be measured until the tournament ends. The structural point is clear now. A strategy that needs openness while withdrawing it works against itself.

2. Iran: competing against the host at war

In late February 2026 the United States and Israel struck Iran. Iran had qualified for a World Cup hosted by a state it is now fighting (Gulf News, 2026). The host made the tension plain. The US president said it was not appropriate for the Iranian team to attend, citing safety. Iran said it would boycott the United States but not the tournament, and asked FIFA to reconsider the host (ESPN, 2026). Iran moved its base camp to Mexico. Part of its delegation was refused entry. Iranian fans were barred, and days before kick-off their match tickets were revoked (American Immigration Council, 2026; France 24, 2026). A reported US approach to replace Iran with Italy, a team that did not qualify, was declined (CNN, 2026). There is no clear recent precedent for a qualifying nation competing while at war with its host.

3. FIFA's standards: the Russia and Israel question

FIFA and UEFA suspended Russia from all competition four days after the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine (FIFA, 2022). In September 2025, UN experts called for Israel's suspension from international football over Gaza. FIFA declined to act and called the matter geopolitical (UN OHCHR, 2025; Al Jazeera, 2025a). Israel did not qualify for 2026. The body's own record cuts deeper than commentary here. In 2023, FIFA removed Indonesia as host of the U-20 World Cup after it refused to host Israel (CNN, 2023). FIFA has acted firmly over an entry refusal before. Critics read the gap, days against Russia and no comparable step elsewhere, as selective use of the body's own logic. FIFA's defenders note that the Russia decision was shaped partly by UEFA and that the legal questions differ. The asymmetry is the point. Action within days and inaction over years

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are both choices, and the first makes the second harder to defend. Palestinian football has meanwhile recorded heavy losses of players and infrastructure (Al Jazeera, 2023).

4. Infantino: conduct and the ethics process

FIFA's code requires its president to stay politically neutral with governments. The president gave the inaugural FIFA Peace Prize to the host head of state at the December 2025 draw in Washington. He appears regularly at his side and has acted as the public channel for the host government's assurances about which teams will be welcome (Al Jazeera, 2025b; NPR, 2026). In December 2025 a human-rights group filed a formal ethics complaint over the award. In June 2026 the Norwegian Football Federation backed it, its president having earlier urged FIFA to abolish the prize to avoid being drawn into politics (Al Jazeera, 2025b; Al Jazeera, 2026a; Front Office Sports, 2026). The president's defence is that close host relations were operationally necessary. Whether the conduct breaches the code is now before FIFA's ethics committee, and this report does not pre-empt it. The standing point is simple. The right to claim neutrality rests on the conduct of the body that claims it.

5. Immigration: exclusion as a political outcome

Fans from Côte d'Ivoire, Haiti, Iran, and Senegal, all qualifying nations, cannot attend US matches under current travel restrictions. Players and officials are exempt (American Immigration Council, 2026; CFR, 2026). A separate visa-bond measure requires deposits of up to \$15,000 from travellers of five qualified countries (American Immigration Council, 2026). The effect is visible in named cases. A Somali referee, Omar Artan, set to be the first from his country to officiate at a World Cup, was barred from entry (CBS News, 2026). Moroccan fans were refused visas in large numbers (Al Jazeera, 2026b; Morocco World News, 2026). The administration's case is that entry screening is a sovereign right, that participants are exempt, and that past US-hosted events carried entry conditions. The new feature of 2026 is the effect on several qualifying nations at once, during an active conflict. A tournament sold as universal is hosted by a state that filters attendance by nationality.

IV. WHAT THE MONITORING DATA SHOWS

Monitoring of international coverage across four streams, US policy, Iran, Palestine, and the FIFA president, shows a consistent pattern. Neutral coverage dominates every stream, which confirms that football is the larger conversation. The political signal is steady. Negative coverage is more common than positive on most politically charged threads, and it divides by language and region rather than by sport. Spanish-language coverage is the most negative. Arabic-language coverage runs net positive, carried partly by enthusiasm for the eight participating Arab teams. The Palestine file is the most negative and the most discussed.

Stream	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Palestine	31%	58%	11%
Iran	23%	61%	16%
US policy	20%	62%	18%
FIFA president	9%	80%	11%

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V. THE PUBLIC NARRATIVE

A reading of the wider public conversation shows how the tournament is being discussed. It centres on the United States as host and on Iran, with entry policy close behind.

Subject	Share of conversation
United States as host	29%
Iran	20%
Visas and entry	16%
Trump	12%
Russia	6%
Infantino	5%
Israel	5%
Palestine and Gaza	3%
FIFA Peace Prize	1%

Share of the political conversation mentioning each subject. Source: Makana 360.

The dominant frame is a double standard

The most-shared political claim is that FIFA banned Russia for attacking Ukraine, yet the United States attacked Iran and is hosting while barring Iranians. It travels in English, Spanish, and Portuguese, posted by independent accounts. It is mass-scale support for the institutional-consistency argument above, and it runs on Russia and Iran, not only Russia and Israel.

The target is the United States as host, not the tournament

The criticism does not reject the World Cup or the other two hosts. A recurring theme praises Mexico as the warm host and sets it against the United States. The complaint is specific to the US as host.

Exclusion travels through named people

Exclusion is the largest grievance, and it spreads because it has faces. The barred Somali referee, the Iranian fans whose tickets were pulled, the Moroccan fans refused visas, and an Iraqi player reported detained for hours at a US airport are each carried as a specific case, not a statistic. The immigration section is strongest built around these cases.

The critique uses FIFA's own precedents

The public argument is historically literate. The most-used comparison is Qatar 2022: critics who condemned Qatar on human rights are accused of going quiet now that a Western power hosts. Others invoke the 1936 Berlin Olympics, the removal of Indonesia as host in 2023, the apartheid-era sporting boycotts, and Russia's visa-free fan entry in 2018 (FIFA, 2018). The consistency case is being made at scale, using FIFA's own record.

The conversation is regionally differentiated

The same grievance is carried by different voices. English-language posts lead on exclusion, Africa, and human rights. Spanish-language posts, the largest non-English bloc, frame the host as far-right and stress Iran solidarity and immigration enforcement. Brazilian posts carry the Russia comparison. Arabic posts are smaller in volume and focus on specific cases and on Mexico as the better host. French posts lead on the referee. The result is not one global narrative but several regional ones that reach the same conclusion.

There is little defence of the host in the conversation

Defensive framing, that entry is a sovereign right, that FIFA does not write immigration law, that athletes are exempt, is rare within the monitored conversation. Those arguments exist in institutional and policy discourse but have little reach there. The criticism runs close to one-sided.

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The focus shifted from institutions to people as the tournament neared

Earlier in the window the conversation leaned toward institutional themes, the Peace Prize and Gaza. In the opening week it shifted to lived exclusion, Iran and visas, as abstract concerns became airport detentions and revoked tickets. Secondary strands also run through the data: the tournament as a security and terror risk during the war, ticket prices and FIFA's commercial conduct, summer heat, and questions about FIFA's integrity beyond the neutrality issue.

VI. COUNTERARGUMENTS

Three objections deserve a direct answer. First, World Cups have always been political, so 2026 is not new. The response is that earlier controversies sat outside the mechanics of the tournament, while in 2026 they reach inside it: where teams train, which fans attend, which officials keep their posts. Second, FIFA's role is to organise football, not to resolve conflicts or write immigration law. That is true, but a body that invoked shared values to suspend Russia within days widened its own remit, and the choice not to apply the same logic elsewhere is the charge. Third, the tournament is a commercial and sporting success. It is, and projected revenues exceed prior editions (Guardian, 2026). Both can be true at once. The claim here is that political themes are embedded, not that the sport is diminished. One point from the data belongs here: these defences are made by institutions, not by the public, where they have little reach.

VII. CONCLUSION

Politics is not interrupting the 2026 World Cup. It is part of its setting, and to an unusual degree it reaches the mechanics of the event. The 2026 edition carries a level of embedded political complexity with no clear precedent in recent tournaments. Enthusiasm for the football is genuine and, by volume, still larger than the political conversation. The precedents established during the 2026 tournament are likely to shape expectations of governance, neutrality, and host-state conduct at future tournaments.

Key findings. The host is using the tournament as soft power while withdrawing the openness that soft power requires (F1). Entry policy, not rhetoric, is the hardest evidence that politics governs the event (F2). Iran is the point where the sporting frame and the geopolitical one cannot be separated (F3). The contrast between the Russia and Israel decisions, set against FIFA's removal of Indonesia as host in 2023, is the body's clearest test of consistency (F4). And the public conversation, across languages and named voices, already reads the tournament as political (F5).

This assessment takes no position on the underlying political disputes. It measures the institution only against its own stated standards.

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