

Why the 2026 World Cup can't match the Qatar edition



In the United Nations hall overlooking the East River in Midtown Manhattan, FIFA President Gianni Infantino made striking and bold remarks on Friday, May 22, saying: “If it were up to me, I would host the next 10 World Cups in Qatar.”

Infantino did not stop there. He described Qatar 2022 as “the best in World Cup history” in terms of the quality of play and organization, praising its exceptional festive atmosphere and iconic stadiums. He stressed that the tournament saw no significant incidents or security problems, and revealed that FIFA is currently working to draw on Qatari organizational expertise and personnel to transfer the knowledge gained from the 2022 World Cup to the organizers of the 2026 tournament.

The United States alone will host 78 of the 104 matches in the 2026 World Cup, or 75 percent of the entire tournament, across 11 cities: New York/New Jersey, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, Seattle, San Francisco, Boston, Philadelphia, Miami, and Kansas City. That includes all knockout-stage matches from the quarterfinals through the final, which will be held at MetLife Stadium in New Jersey/New York.

Mexico, meanwhile, will host 13 matches in three cities — Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey — including the opening match between Mexico and South Africa at the historic Azteca Stadium in Mexico City.

Canada will also host 13 matches in two cities, Toronto and Vancouver. This

uneven distribution has concentrated nearly the entire weight of the tournament in the United States, meaning that any organizational, political, or security problem inside the US would directly affect the World Cup as a whole.

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A post shared by Gianni Infantino – FIFA President (@gianni_infantino)

These remarks did not come out of nowhere. Their timing was highly significant: less than a month before the 2026 World Cup kicks off on June 11, observers are asking a question echoing across sports media and fan forums around the world: Where is the excitement? Where is that global wave of anticipation and thrill we have come to expect before every major football tournament?

The comparison with the atmosphere before Qatar 2022 is shocking by every measure, as the world at the time was gripped by an exceptional state of anticipation and preparation. Doha was the focus of all eyes as it completed its preparations to welcome millions of fans arriving from every corner of the globe.

Its hotels and housing units were fully booked months before the tournament began, the flags of participating teams lined the streets of the Qatari capital, and talk of the World Cup became a daily topic among fans in cafes and on social media.

Today, by contrast, the picture is entirely different. Hotels in the host cities in the United States are complaining of weak bookings, while international media speak of a lack of excitement and a tournament without spirit. Some former FIFA officials have even openly called for a boycott of the upcoming edition, which is supposed to be the biggest World Cup in history. It is the first of its kind to feature 48 teams instead of 32, and the first to be hosted by three countries at once – the United States, Canada, and Mexico – from June 11 to July 19, 2026.

“For the fans, there’s only one piece of advice: stay away from the USA!” I think Mark Pieth is right to question this World Cup. #MarkPieth #GianniInfantino #DonaldTrump #FIFAWorldCup2026 #USA

– Joseph S Blatter (@SeppBlatter) January 26, 2026

Wars and internal tensions

The atmosphere surrounding the World Cup cannot be separated from the turbulent international context. The world is living through a period of instability on several fronts, most notably the military escalation in the Middle East following the US-Israeli war on Iran that began late last February. That prompted the Iranian Football Federation to enter talks with FIFA to move its team’s matches from US soil to Mexico out of concern for the safety of its players.

Even President Donald Trump himself said the Iranian team was “welcome,” but suggested that playing in the United States might not be appropriate “for their safety and their lives” an unprecedented statement from the leader of a host country toward a participating team.

Internal tensions in the host countries, especially the United States, have also played a major role in shaping a negative image and stripping the upcoming tournament of its shine and appeal. For months, the current US administration has been waging a broad campaign to tighten immigration measures, including detentions and raids carried out by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, in several states, leading to widespread public protests and clashes with demonstrators.

Minnesota alone has seen two American citizens killed by federal agents in recent weeks, contributing to a grim image among foreign fans of the atmosphere that will greet them.

In neighboring Mexico, fears are mounting over drug cartel violence, especially after recent clashes involving the Jalisco cartel and a mass shooting in Puebla state that killed 10 people, in addition to the issue of the missing, which families are demanding be raised on the sidelines of the tournament.

Empty hotels

One of the clearest indicators of weak interest in this edition is the shocking figures revealed by the American Hotel & Lodging Association (AHLA) in its report issued this May. Of more than 200 hotels surveyed across the 11 US host cities, nearly 80 percent said World Cup bookings were falling short of initial expectations.

Cities such as Kansas City, Boston, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Seattle have even seen declines below normal summer levels without the tournament. Some hotel owners have gone so far as to describe the World Cup as “a non-event” an unusual description for the world’s biggest sporting event, awaited by millions of football fans.

The reasons for this decline are many, led by unprecedentedly high ticket, accommodation, and transportation prices that have deterred many ordinary fans from traveling. The cost of a one-week trip for one person, including tickets, international airfare, and hotel accommodation, is estimated at more than \$10,000 at a minimum. Add to that the geographic spread of matches across 16 cities in three countries, which has made it difficult for fans to plan a “full World Cup trip,” unlike in Qatar, where all the stadiums were just minutes apart and connected entirely free of charge by the metro and public transportation network.

On the other hand, FIFA itself disrupted the hotel market when it pre-booked thousands of rooms in the 16 host cities, then in March invoked a withdrawal clause in its contracts and canceled large numbers of those reservations. That created what some hotels described as an “artificial demand signal” that prompted them to raise prices before discovering that actual demand was far lower.

That is in addition to the rise in ticket prices themselves. At Qatar 2022, opening-match tickets ranged from \$55 for Category 4 to \$618 for Category 1. At the 2026 World Cup, prices have soared dramatically, starting at \$560 for Category 4 and reaching \$2,735 for Category 1 an increase of more than four times the Qatar edition.

The same applies to group-stage tickets. In Qatar, prices started at just \$11 for Category 4 and reached \$220 for Category 1. By contrast, prices for the same round at the 2026 World Cup start at \$100 and go up to \$575, reflecting an increase of more than fivefold.

As for final-match tickets, prices have risen shockingly from \$206 for Category 4 and \$1,607 for Category 1 at Qatar 2022 to \$2,030 for Category 4 and \$6,370 for Category 1 at the 2026 World Cup roughly four to 10 times the previous price.

Trump's policies compared with Qatar's facilitation

The same AHLA report shows that about 65 percent of the hotels surveyed attributed weak bookings to “visa barriers and broader geopolitical concerns,” reflecting the deeper problem with this tournament. The main host, under President Donald Trump, has imposed strict restrictions on granting visas to visitors from dozens of countries, especially in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Although the White House formed a special World Cup task force and exempted fans from 50 countries from a \$15,000 visa bond on condition that they prove they hold valid tickets, concerns have remained because of bureaucratic complications and long waiting periods.

The fundamental difference here is clear when compared with the policy adopted by Qatar through the simplified Hayya Card system, which enabled fans to enter the country through easy procedures that were nearly free. Today, fans from countries such as Morocco, Egypt, Iran, Algeria, Tunisia, and Saudi Arabia find themselves facing a visa application process that takes months and may end in rejection after the fan has already spent thousands of dollars on tickets and reservations.

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FIFA WORLD CUP Qatar 2022

More troubling still, Football Supporters Europe, or FSE, has publicly expressed concern over tightened security measures and the “ongoing militarization of US police forces,” noting that FIFA has not provided clear information on what will be allowed inside or outside stadiums, and that US authorities have not ruled out the presence of ICE personnel around the tournament.

The US Transportation Security Administration, or TSA, and ICE are drawing up strict security procedures in preparation for the tournament, including rigorous airport screenings and expanded checks on arrivals from abroad, in addition to a heavy field presence around stadiums and fan zones. Mexico, for its part, has announced a plan to deploy nearly 100,000 security personnel to protect crowds, while Canada continues coordinating its measures with its two partners.

This heavy security presence, while objectively necessary given the multiple threats, creates a feeling entirely different from the warm festive atmosphere seen in Qatar, where authorities secured the entire tournament through a unified force under the umbrella of the “2022 Tournament Safety and Security Operations Committee,” which included Qatari security forces — the Interior Ministry and the Internal Security Force, Lekhwiya — without any significant incidents of disorder or violence, according to what FIFA President Gianni Infantino himself confirmed after the end of the 2022 World Cup.

The additional dilemma is that TSA procedures are internationally known for their strictness and long lines, and screenings can take hours for travelers of some

nationalities, making the very experience of arriving in the country exhausting before fans even reach the stadium. Likewise, the absence of international coordination with police delegations from participating countries — the so-called “spotters” — is an unusual precedent in the modern history of the tournament and heightens national federations’ concerns for the safety of their supporters.

In a notable development, ICE officially revealed on Wednesday, May 20, its operational plan for the World Cup, in an announcement whose timing coincided with reports of weak ticket sales — something Newsweek clearly noted by linking the two events in its headline and coverage.

According to the magazine, Homeland Security Secretary Markwayne Mullin said federal agencies would pursue counterfeit goods and human trafficking, adding that “criminal activity follows large crowds.” He confirmed that ICE and its investigative arm, Homeland Security Investigations, or HSI, would work “every day” throughout the tournament alongside Customs and Border Protection, or CBP.

But although US authorities presented the announcement as a way of reassuring the public, its effect on international fans is exactly the opposite. It reinforces the image of a tournament surrounded by federal enforcement agencies more than a unifying football celebration, and it has strengthened the view among many observers that combining the heavy presence of ICE — with its poor reputation — around stadiums with the broader context of hard-line immigration campaigns may further discourage a wide segment of foreign fans from traveling. That is reflected in the number of unsold tickets even for US national team matches.

The media and cultural dimension: How Qatar built its own narrative

Any analysis of the gap between the atmosphere of the 2026 World Cup and its Qatari counterpart remains incomplete without pausing at a fundamental dimension that observers often overlook: the media and cultural dimension.

Interest in Qatar 2022 did not come out of nowhere. It was shaped by a massive narrative battle that preceded the tournament by months, even years, in which Qatar was more often the target of criticism than the object of celebration.

One striking irony is that this broad critical campaign waged by major Western media outlets against Doha — especially British, German, and French ones — ultimately turned into a huge source of free publicity for the tournament as a whole. Nothing generates fame for an event more than the wide controversy it provokes.

Western media focused on three main issues: migrant workers and labor conditions at stadium construction sites; restrictions on the LGBTQ community and its public expression inside Qatar; and restrictions related to alcohol

consumption around stadiums and in public areas. For months before kickoff, these issues formed the daily focus of reports on the BBC, The Guardian, Der Spiegel, and others.

The surprise was that this intense media focus, despite its outwardly negative tone, produced the opposite result from what its proponents expected. On the one hand, it raised global curiosity about the tournament and made audiences follow it for reasons beyond football to discover this Middle Eastern country everyone was talking about, to test whether Qatar would really succeed in organizing the event despite all the negative expectations, and to see how a conservative country would deal with a global audience of diverse backgrounds and cultures.

On the other hand — and this is the more important point — the very restrictions criticized by Western media made Qatar a preferred destination for a broad segment of conservative audiences and families around the world, especially from the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America. This was a segment that had traditionally avoided traveling to Europe or South America because of the atmosphere associated with so-called hooligans, riots, high crime rates, and the excessive spread of alcohol around stadiums.

Conservative families coming from Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Indonesia, or even from conservative US states such as Utah, Alabama, Oklahoma, and Idaho found themselves at a tournament where they could take their children into the stands without worry and without being exposed to scenes of drunkenness or disorder. This feature became an additional draw that no previous World Cup had offered.

In response to the Western media campaign, Qatar managed its narrative battle intelligently by deploying its widely influential media arms, foremost among them Al Jazeera in both its Arabic and English editions, which devoted intensive and continuous coverage highlighting the tournament's human and civilizational dimensions, far from the skeptical narrative of Western media.

Al Jazeera presented the World Cup as a historic Arab achievement and an opportunity to introduce Islamic civilization and Arab culture to the world. It highlighted the stories of visitors impressed by the hospitality and quality of organization, and broadcast images of safe streets, high-end stadiums, and the festive atmosphere in attractions such as the Doha Corniche, Souq Waqif, and the Old Port.

BeIN Sports, also owned by Qatar, likewise played a pivotal role in global sports broadcasting, while digital platforms such as AJ+ worked to deliver short visual content aimed at younger generations on social media, refuting circulating claims about Qatar and presenting the reality on the ground as it was. This strategy

succeeded in creating a strong balance with the Western narrative, and at times even outperformed it among broad segments of football audiences around the world.

The story of the Kenyan metro man

Perhaps the most beautiful human story produced by the Qatar tournament was that of Kenyan security worker Abu Bakr Abbas, the 23-year-old who worked near Souq Waqif, guiding fans coming from the traditional market and from the stadiums toward the nearby metro station.

Abbas used to repeat a simple phrase in a monotone voice over a loudspeaker: “Metro? This way,” until one day he decided to break the boredom by turning it into a catchy tune and amusing body movements using an oversized finger and a high tennis umpire’s chair. Videos filmed by fans spread like wildfire on TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram within days, and that simple employee from the Kenyan city of Mombasa, who had traveled in search of a livelihood after his parents stopped him from leaving four times, became a global phenomenon. Fans and journalists lined up to take photos with him and gave him the nickname “Metro Man.”

Al Jazeera was among the first to pick up the story and bring it to the world in video reports, and Abu Bakr quickly became a human symbol of the tournament as a whole, embodying the spirit of Qatari hospitality open to workers coming from Africa and Asia, and indirectly responding to all the criticism directed at Qatar over labor issues.

In a gesture that revealed the organizers’ communications savvy, Qatar invited the “Metro Man” to address the crowd in one of the packed stadiums. The young Kenyan stood before tens of thousands of fans from around the world in a scene that would have been hard to imagine just months earlier. He was also officially honored by his management at the end of the tournament and received certificates of appreciation documented by media outlets and digital platforms.

Abbas’ story was turned into material for shirts, stickers, and songs, and became a widely shared symbol in the tournament’s collective memory. Some admirers even created challenges to imitate his unique style. This story simple on the surface, profound in its significance — captures part of the secret behind Qatar’s media and human success. Doha succeeded in creating stars from outside the pitch, turning a simple security worker into a global icon, and leaving in the hearts of millions of fans a warm memory unrelated to the matches themselves, but to the human atmosphere surrounding them.

Today, nearly four years after the 2022 tournament, Abu Bakr Abbas is still in Qatar, where organizers continue to rely on him for tournaments and events that

the Gulf state hosts on a regular basis. He has also built a strong digital presence, with more than 100,000 followers on his personal account on Instagram.

When all of this is compared with the 2026 World Cup, the gap becomes clear. The upcoming tournament lacks that controversial central narrative that drives intensive media coverage. The United States, Canada, and Mexico are not under organizational scrutiny, and there is no heated narrative struggle between a camp of critics and a camp of defenders, causing the tournament to slide into a kind of media indifference.

The media arms of the three host countries are also dispersed and fragmented. There is no single channel or unified network embracing the tournament's promotion with the same momentum and consistency that Al Jazeera and BeIN Sports brought to the Qatar World Cup. More importantly, the current tournament is not presenting itself as a "family-safe" event. On the contrary, it is overshadowed by fears of cartels in Mexico, immigration police operations in the United States, the possibility of disorder, and high crime rates in some host cities all factors that repel precisely the conservative and family-oriented segment that formed a major fan base in Qatar.

From a mass event to an experience tailored for the wealthy

What is happening with the 2026 World Cup is not merely a natural lull that may accompany any tournament. It is a complex phenomenon reflecting an unprecedented intersection of economic, political, security, logistical, media, and cultural factors. The exorbitant prices of tickets in a single category — which in some cases exceed 10 times those of the Qatar edition — have transformed the tournament from a mass event into an experience reserved for the wealthy alone.

The geographic distribution across three countries and 16 cities has also fragmented the fan experience, which in Qatar was concentrated and easy, while political and security unrest in the United States and Mexico, alongside the war raging in the Middle East, has created a repelling rather than an attractive environment.

This is in addition to visa policies and strict security procedures that have turned the foreign fan's journey into an uncertainty-laden adventure. The absence of a central narrative that stimulates interest, along with the fragmentation of the host countries' media arms, has deprived the tournament of the momentum that Qatar created through the smart deployment of its media networks in the face of critical campaigns.

By contrast, Qatar in 2022 succeeded in presenting what was close to an ideal model for organizing the World Cup: a limited area, closely clustered stadiums,

affordable and accessible ticket prices, simplified entry procedures and free transportation through the Hayya Card, accommodations at varied price points, comprehensive security without incidents, and an Arab, family-friendly atmosphere that gave the tournament a human character distinguishing it from all previous — and perhaps future — editions.

Most importantly, Qatar succeeded in turning Western media criticism itself into a tool of free promotion, and in creating a tournament attractive to conservative audiences and families who found in it a safe alternative to the traditional atmosphere of disorder. It also turned human stories such as that of the “Metro Man” into icons embodying its true spirit. That is why many journalistic writings today return to the Qatari experience as the gold standard that is difficult to replicate.

For example, Germany’s Deutsche Welle (DW) published analytical reports reviewing “the six ways the 2026 tournament will be different from Qatar,” focusing on the contrast in infrastructure and transportation, and how fans in Qatar could ride the metro for free between stadiums, while in the United States they will need to book costly and exhausting domestic flights.

Reuters, meanwhile, covered the exceptional security discipline and atmosphere of reassurance, free of disorder, in Qatar 2022. It quoted female fans of different nationalities saying they had not been subjected to any form of harassment and were able to move comfortably through the streets of Doha and around the stadiums even late at night, compared with the complex security challenges — amid widespread concern — of securing 16 far-flung host cities in North America for the 2026 edition.

In specialized sports media, ESPN, one of the world’s biggest and most famous sports networks, has focused extensively on the fan ticket crisis and the insane rise in prices in the United States compared with Qatar. It criticized the application of the American dynamic pricing system, which angered global supporters’ groups such as FSE, which described the prices as extortionate compared with Qatar’s affordable fixed prices. The US network summed it up by saying: “The cheapest ticket for the 2026 final is more expensive than the highest category for the 2022 final hosted by Qatar.”

Some of this apathy may dissipate as the major matches approach and the knockout rounds begin, and prices may fall on the secondary market, opening the door to a broader segment of local fans in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. But perhaps what best sums up the entire picture is FIFA President Gianni Infantino’s striking admission when he said from the heart of New York that “if it were up to him, he would host the next 10 World Cups in Qatar” as if implicitly

acknowledging that the Doha model has gone beyond merely being a successful edition to become a benchmark that is difficult to reproduce, to the point that FIFA has had to enlist Qatari personnel to transfer their expertise to the organizers of the 2026 tournament.

The deeper lesson the 2026 World Cup has offered so far is that the success of any global sporting event is not measured only by its size, the number of teams, or its expected revenues of more than \$13 billion, but by its ability to create a collective sense of joy, belonging, and safety; to craft a convincing media narrative; and to weave human stories that leave their mark on memory all elements that Qatar touched in an exceptional way that others may find hard to replicate.

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