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## **Goals and Geopolitics: The Iran-US War and the 2026 World Cup**

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# Goals and Geopolitics: The Iran-US War and the 2026 World Cup<sup>1</sup>

By Gregory T. Papanikos\*

*Mega sporting events such as the FIFA World Cup serve as powerful arenas where sport, politics, and media converge. This paper examines the unprecedented geopolitical crisis surrounding Iran's participation in the 2026 FIFA World Cup, co-hosted by the United States, Canada, and Mexico, against the backdrop of active U.S.–Israeli military operations against Iran that began in February 2026. Drawing on the analytical framework of hard, soft, and smart power (Nye, 1990, 2004, 2008, 2009; Brannagan et al., 2025), the paper traces the intersection of football and U.S.–Iran relations across three moments: the symbolically charged 1998 World Cup match in Lyon, the diplomatically significant 2000 friendly at the Rose Bowl, and the politically tense 2022 World Cup encounter in Qatar. It then analyses the contradictory positions of the key actors — FIFA, the Trump administration, and Iran — over Iran's scheduled group-stage matches on American soil in 2026. The paper argues that the 2026 tournament exposes the limits of sport as a soft-power instrument when hard-power realities dominate, and illustrates how mega sporting events can simultaneously function as tools of image projection, arenas of geopolitical confrontation, and sites of smart-power contestation. The paper contributes to the broader literature on sportswashing, sport diplomacy, and the political economy of mega events.*

**Keywords:** *FIFA World Cup 2026; U.S.–Iran relations; sport diplomacy; soft power; hard power; smart power; sportswashing; mega sporting events; geopolitics; football and politics*

## Introduction

Mega sporting events, such as the FIFA World Cup, are not merely athletic competitions; they function as powerful platforms where politics, culture, and media converge. In a prior study (Papanikos, 2023), *The Global Media Coverage of the 2022 Qatar World Football Cup*, I examined how international media portrayed Qatar's hosting of the event, highlighting the interplay of political narratives, economic interests, and global perception. The research demonstrated that media coverage, ranging from television and radio to online platforms, not only shaped international public opinion but also reflected underlying geopolitical tensions, such as those revealed in the “Qatargate” scandal. Complementing this, my recent research (Papanikos, 2026a) on *Dynamics of Regional Security in the*

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*Mediterranean Basin* explored the complex and interdependent security environment in the Middle East and surrounding regions, emphasizing how historical rivalries, alliance networks, and strategic interests influence state behavior and international relations. Together, these studies provide a foundation for understanding how media framing of sports events intersects with regional and global security dynamics. Building on these insights, the present paper investigates how the 2026 FIFA World Cup, set against the backdrop of U.S.–Iran tensions, is represented in global media, highlighting the continued entanglement of sport, politics, and media narratives. On the qualification process of the FIFA 2026 World Cup with an emphasis on Europe see Papanikos (2026b).

It should be noted that in football battles the team which scores more goals win. In war battles the winner is determined by achieving less (a) territorial losses (b) human losses and (c) economic losses relative to the opponents.

### **Mega Sports Events: Gains and Losses**

As I argued in my previous work on Qatar's organization of the 2022 World Cup (Papanikos, 2023), the organization of Mega Sports Events (MSEs) serves as a tool to enhance a country's international image. This objective has two sides.

On the positive side, a country wants to show off its great achievements in all fields and invite the world community to visit either in person or virtually through the coverage of the events by various means. If the games are well organized — at least as perceived by visitors and spectators through TV coverage — then it is said that the games left a legacy which can be used to promote the country, increase its international tourism arrivals, boost its trade with other countries, attract international investment, increase collaboration in the areas of education and culture, and use it as soft power to promote its foreign policy objectives.

On the other hand, the same event may have a negative side. MSEs such as the World Cup and the Olympic Games are in some cases used by countries to cover up their internal problems that have received negative publicity. The country's image has been tarnished and sports can be used as a washing machine to clean it up. The term used in this case is aptly called "sportswashing." (Papanikos, 2023).

It is important to note, however, that if a country does not suffer from significant negative international publicity regarding its internal affairs, it will pursue MSEs primarily for their positive promotional effects. Sportswashing as a motive arises specifically when a country seeks to repair or counterbalance a damaged international image.

What about the countries and athletes that participate in an event? My argument is that they serve exactly the same purpose. Their team, whether it is a World Cup team or an Olympic team, wants to make their country look better. This is more evident in the World Cup than in the Olympic Games because all teams that qualify to play in the World Cup must first go through a qualification round in order to earn their participation. This in itself makes world media headlines. It is worth noting that this soft power effect begins long before the tournament opens, as the qualification rounds are played across multiple

countries and continents, amplifying the impact well beyond the host nation (Papanikos, 2026b).

This effect is particularly pronounced for smaller or developing nations, for whom a strong performance in a World Cup or Olympic Games can achieve a level of international visibility that far exceeds what conventional diplomacy could deliver. Morocco's remarkable run to the semi-finals of the 2022 World Cup, for instance, generated unprecedented positive global attention for the country. Furthermore, individual athletes themselves act as powerful national ambassadors — a single star player can carry enormous soft power for their country well beyond the team's collective performance. It is important to distinguish, however, that while host countries deliberately pursue these image benefits as a calculated strategy, participating countries often gain them as a natural and welcome byproduct of their sporting achievement.

Hosting an MSE may also create its own foreign policy problems, particularly when the host country is a major power with complex international relationships. History has shown that Olympic Games and World Cups can become targets of boycotts and diplomatic protests when relations between the host country and other nations are strained or openly hostile. The 1980 Moscow Olympics, boycotted by 65 nations following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the retaliatory Eastern Bloc boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, are the most striking examples of how a hosted MSE can deepen rather than ease geopolitical tensions. More recently, the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics prompted a diplomatic boycott by several Western nations. In such cases, the intended soft power benefit of hosting can be partially or entirely undermined, and the event itself becomes an arena for geopolitical confrontation rather than international goodwill.

The 2026 World Cup is at the center of a foreign policy crisis involving the USA and Iran. Since February 28, 2026, the USA and Israel have conducted military operations against Iran, creating an unprecedented context for the tournament. Iran had qualified for the World Cup, with all three group stage matches scheduled in the United States. The Iranian Football Federation requested that FIFA relocate its matches to co-host Mexico, and Mexico's president expressed willingness to accommodate this. FIFA President Infantino, however, insists there is only "Plan A" — Iran plays as scheduled in the US. President Trump offered contradictory statements, initially supporting Iran's participation but later suggesting safety risks for its players. Iran maintains that its national team cannot be excluded from the tournament. Notably, this is not the first time US-Iran tensions have intersected with the World Cup; similar conflicts arose in 1998 and 2022, as will be examined in the following sections.

## **Politics and Football**

Sports in general, and football in particular, have long served as a tool to achieve foreign policy objectives. There are two well-documented incidents linking sports and politics.

On the 24–25 December 1914, sections of the Western Front witnessed a spontaneous ceasefire between British and German soldiers. Troops emerged into *No Man's Land*, exchanged greetings, shared gifts, and sang carols; some accounts describe informal football matches (Adams, 2015). While celebrated as a symbol of wartime humanity, the truce was not universal, and the scale of football play remains contested, with primary sources suggesting informal kickabouts rather than organized matches (Adams, 2015; Wiedemann, Pina e Cunha, & Clegg, 2021).

Conversely, football has also precipitated conflict. The Football War between El Salvador and Honduras in July 1969 followed contentious World Cup qualifying matches: 8 June 1969 (Honduras 1–0 El Salvador), 15 June 1969 (El Salvador 3–0 Honduras), and a playoff on 27 June 1969 (El Salvador 3–2 Honduras after extra time) (Bar-On & Lewis, 2025). Heightened political tensions over land, migration, and instability led El Salvador to launch a military offensive on 14 July 1969, ending on 18 July 1969 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).

These cases illustrate football's dual role in politics: it can foster reconciliation and symbolic cooperation or exacerbate existing tensions, highlighting the sport's function as a foreign or domestic policy tool. The development of soft power is relative a new phenomenon. As Baylis et al. (2023, p. 33) have argued "... globalization enables state and non-state actors to leverage new forms and instruments of power: from soft power to the weaponization of global connectivity". The term of soft power is usually credited to Nye (2004). In Nye (2008, p. 94) power is defined as:

... the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes you want. One can affect others' behavior in three main ways: threats of coercion ("sticks"), inducements and payments ("carrots"), and attraction that makes others want what you want. A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries want to follow it, admiring its values, emulating its example, and/or aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness. In this sense, it is important to set the agenda and attract others in world politics, and not only to force them to change through the threat or use of military or economic weapons. This soft power—getting others to want the outcomes that you want—co-opts people rather than coerces them.

Nye (2009) introduces "smart power" as the strategic combination of hard and soft power. Smart power emphasizes using the right mix of persuasion and coercion depending on the situation. It involves recognizing that military or economic strength alone is often insufficient to achieve long-term objectives; credibility, legitimacy, and cultural influence are equally crucial. In essence, smart power is the art of leveraging both force and attraction to maximize effectiveness in international relations.

By integrating soft and hard approaches, smart power allows states to address complex global challenges—such as wars, terrorism, diplomacy, and international development—more effectively than relying on either approach alone.

Brannagan et al. (2025) argue that the study of sport and politics has been dominated almost exclusively by the concept of "soft power" — the ability to attract and influence others — while largely neglecting two related concepts from Joseph Nye's framework: hard power (achieving outcomes through coercion and payment)

and smart power (the strategic combination of the two). The authors set out to correct this imbalance by offering what they claim is the first systematic application of all three power types to sport, with a particular focus on sports mega-events like the FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games.

To do this, they develop a five-dimensional analytical framework covering: three international dimensions (how sport intersects with global policy, military dynamics, and economic relations), one domestic dimension (how events are used to consolidate power at home), and one risk dimension (the ways power strategies can backfire). Under hard power, for example, they discuss Olympic boycotts, stadium-driven gentrification, and the securitization legacy of hosting events. Under soft power, they examine how events are used to build diplomatic relationships, project national image, and boost leaders' popularity domestically. Their most original contribution is the smart power section, where they reframe the concept not as a power type in its own right, but as a state-led strategic agenda that deliberately integrates security, diplomacy, and development objectives — illustrated through cases like the international response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Qatar's broader geopolitical ambitions.

The paper concludes by calling for richer, more multi-dimensional research in this area, urging scholars to move beyond soft power analyses of authoritarian states and to pay more attention to domestic power dynamics and the risks of "soft disempowerment" — when hosting or participating in sport events damages rather than enhances a state's image and credibility.

### **The “Great Satan” vs. the “Axis of Evil”**

The two terms could almost serve as the names of rival sports clubs. The phrase “Great Satan” has been used by Iranian leaders—especially since the 1979 Iranian Revolution—to describe the United States, reflecting deep political opposition, distrust, and resentment over past events, such as U.S. support for the Shah and subsequent conflicts. Conversely, American politicians and media have occasionally depicted Iran as part of an “evil” force or threat. A notable example is former President George W. Bush’s 2002 designation of Iran as part of the “Axis of Evil,” referencing concerns about terrorism and weapons programs.

The paper by Hareuveny and Blanga (2023) examines two specific football encounters between Iran and the United States as exercises in "football diplomacy," exploring what each side hoped to achieve and why those hopes largely fell short.

#### *The 1998 World Cup Match (21 June 1998, Stade de Gerland, Lyon, France)*

The backdrop to this match was twenty years of severed relations following the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the subsequent hostage crisis. The diplomatic climate had shifted slightly when reformist Mohammad Khatami was elected Iranian president in May 1997 and gave a landmark CNN interview in January 1998 calling for the removal of the "wall of distrust" between the two nations. Both teams had lost their opening group stage matches — the US to Germany

and Iran to Yugoslavia — making this a must-win game for both sides. Iran won 2-1, with goals from Hamid Estili and Mehdi Mahdavi, sparking mass street celebrations across Iran and among diaspora communities worldwide.

Rajkiewicz (2022) frames the match primarily through the lens of international relations theory, situating it within soft power and sport diplomacy frameworks drawn from Murray and Pigman (2014). His core argument is that the match was simultaneously a success and a failure — a success at the individual, symbolic level (the players' gestures, the joint photograph, the flowers), but a failure at the political level because the Iranian authorities ultimately lacked the will to translate that momentum into official diplomatic relations. He places particular weight on the role of non-state actors, especially FIFA's media officer Mehrad Masoudi, who brokered the compromise over the handshake protocol. Rajkiewicz also stresses that the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent Bush administration policy effectively killed whatever chance the match had created.

*The 2000 Friendly Tournament (16 January 2000, Rose Bowl, Los Angeles)*

This match grew directly out of agreements made around the 1998 encounter and represented the first official visit of Iran's national team to the United States since the Islamic Revolution. It took place as part of a four-team friendly tournament also involving Mexico and Ecuador. The lead-up was fraught with logistical crises, threats from Islamist hardliners, disputes over alcohol advertising by sponsor Anheuser-Busch, and immigration standoffs at Chicago's O'Hare Airport. The match ended in a diplomatically fitting 1-1 draw before roughly fifty thousand fans, the vast majority Iranian Americans, at the Rose Bowl.

*The 2022 World Cup Match (29 November 2022, Al Thumama Stadium, Qatar)*

While Brannagan et al. (2025) reference the 1998 World Cup match between Iran and the United States as an example of sport being used to de-escalate military tensions, the paper notably omits the 2022 World Cup encounter between the same two nations — a match that carried significant political weight given the widespread protests inside Iran at the time, and the visible tension among Iranian players over whether to sing the national anthem in solidarity with demonstrators.

The political atmosphere surrounding the 2022 game was especially intense because it took place during widespread protests inside Iran following the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody in September 2022. Demonstrations against the Iranian government spread across the country, and many Iranian athletes faced pressure over whether to publicly support the protesters. Members of the Iranian national team were closely watched during the tournament after they declined to sing the national anthem before their opening World Cup match, which many interpreted as a gesture of solidarity with demonstrators. International attention on Iran's domestic situation therefore became deeply connected to the football tournament itself.

Tensions increased further in the days before the match when United States Soccer Federation briefly posted Iran's national flag on social media without the

emblem of the Islamic Republic, saying it was meant to support protesters in Iran. Iranian state media condemned the move, and some Iranian officials called for disciplinary action against the United States team. Because of this political backdrop, the match was widely described by global media as more than a sporting contest: it became a symbolic encounter shaped by decades of diplomatic conflict, current protests in Iran, and the global visibility of the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

As shown in Table 1, both world cup matches of 1998 and 2022 warrant further and more detailed discussion, particularly in light of the ongoing debate surrounding Iran's potential participation in the 2026 FIFA World Cup, to be co-hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico. The prospect of Iran competing on American soil raises complex questions that cut across all three of the paper's power dimensions — hard, soft and smart — and could serve as a compelling case study for the intersection of sport, diplomacy, security, and domestic politics in a highly charged geopolitical context. These two encounters between Iran and the United States are examined in greater detail in the following section, while the current geopolitical situation surrounding Iran's potential participation in the 2026 FIFA World Cup on American soil is explored in the section thereafter.

**Table 1.** *The Two World Cup Games Compared*

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>2022</b>
Political context	Post–Cold War hostility	Active political crisis (protests)
Tone	Symbolic diplomacy (flowers, gestures)	Open political tension (media, protests)
Result	Iran wins (symbolic victory)	USA wins (sporting consequence)
Narrative	“Football as peace gesture”	“Football as political battlefield”

## **The 2026 World Cup**

Table 2 summarizes the positions of the three principal actors — the Trump administration, FIFA, and Iran — whose contradictory stances have transformed the 2026 World Cup into a geopolitical flashpoint. What is immediately striking is the incoherence within each camp, and the absence of any established diplomatic channel through which the competing interests might be reconciled.

The Trump administration’s position exemplifies what Brannagan et al. (2025) would classify as the “risk dimension” of smart power: the danger that a state’s actions around a mega sporting event backfire and damage rather than enhance its international standing. On the one hand, endorsing Iran’s participation would project an image of the United States as a magnanimous host committed to the universalist principles on which the FIFA World Cup rests; on the other hand, allowing Iranian athletes to compete on American soil while U.S. and Israeli forces are conducting military operations against Iran creates obvious

domestic political difficulties. The result has been a series of contradictory public statements — welcoming Iran one day, warning of safety risks the next — that have satisfied neither FIFA nor the Iranian side, and have undermined American soft power precisely at a moment when the tournament was supposed to demonstrate the country’s capacity to host the world.

FIFA’s position is more consistent, but also more revealing of the institution’s own geopolitical vulnerabilities. By insisting on a single “Plan A” and refusing to relocate Iran’s matches to Mexico, FIFA is defending the organisational and commercial integrity of the tournament against what it regards as an external political interference. This mirrors the stance taken by the International Olympic Committee during the 1980 and 1984 boycotts, when governing bodies sought to maintain the fiction of sport’s political neutrality even as that neutrality was being openly violated. FIFA’s authority, however, ultimately depends on the host nation’s cooperation, and the United States government retains significant leverage through visa policy, security provision, and public statements. The relationship between FIFA and the Trump administration therefore reproduces, at the institutional level, the same tension between soft-power aspirations and hard-power realities that characterizes the bilateral relationship between the United States and Iran.

**Table 2.** *World Cup 2026 – Positions Compared*

<b>Actor</b>	<b>Main Position</b>	<b>Media</b>	<b>Stance</b>
Donald Trump	Mixed and contradictory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Iran is “welcome” to compete</li> <li>- Later it’s “not appropriate” and unsafe for them</li> <li>- Warned about players’ “life and safety”</li> </ul>	Politically conflicted: officially allowed, but discouraged
FIFA	Clear support for participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Confirms Iran will play as scheduled</li> <li>- Rejected request to move matches out of the U.S.</li> <li>- Working directly with Iran on preparations</li> </ul>	Firm: Iran participates, no change in plan
Iran (football + officials)	Defensive and uncertain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “no one can exclude” us</li> <li>- Criticized U.S. over safety concerns</li> <li>- At times considered withdrawing due to war</li> </ul>	Divided: wants to compete, but worried about safety & politics

Iran’s own position reflects the internal divisions that have characterised its engagement with the World Cup since 1998. The Iranian Football Federation’s insistence that “no one can exclude us” echoes the spirit of defiance that Iranian

players displayed at the 1998 World Cup, when the regime simultaneously celebrated the team's victory over the United States and attempted to contain its political symbolism. In 2026, that same tension between national pride and regime calculation is playing out in a far more dangerous context. The military situation creates a genuine security risk for Iranian players and officials travelling to the United States — a risk that is not merely rhetorical, as the 2022 World Cup demonstrated how publicly visible the political pressures on the Iranian squad can become. At the same time, withdrawal from the tournament would hand the United States a symbolic victory and deprive Iran of one of the few remaining platforms on which it can assert a positive international presence.

On 9 May 2026, the Iranian Football Federation issued a formal statement confirming the national team's participation in the 2026 World Cup while simultaneously setting out ten conditions that the host nations must meet (Al Jazeera, 2026). The conditions include guaranteed visa issuance for all players and technical staff — with explicit reference to those who have completed military service in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), including Mehdi Taremi and Ehsan Hajsafi — the assurance that delegation members will not be subjected to questioning by immigration authorities during travel, a clear mechanism for issuing visas to Iranian journalists and supporters, respect for Iran's flag and national anthem throughout the tournament, and heightened security at airports, hotels, and travel routes connected to match venues. The federation's statement declared that “no external power can deprive Iran of its participation in a cup to which it has qualified with merit,” while insisting that the team would attend “without any retreat from our beliefs, culture, and convictions” (Al Jazeera, 2026). FIFA Secretary-General Mattias Grafström subsequently invited Iranian officials to Zurich on 20 May 2026 for preparatory talks, following the widely reported incident in which federation president Mehdi Taj had his visa revoked mid-flight to the FIFA Congress in Vancouver due to his alleged IRGC ties. This formal articulation of conditions marks a significant shift in Iran's public posture: from ambiguity about participation to conditional confirmation, a move that transfers the diplomatic burden to the host governments and to FIFA itself.

The role of co-host Mexico adds a further dimension to this crisis. Mexico's president's willingness to relocate Iran's matches reflects both genuine hospitality and a calculated opportunity to assert an independent foreign policy identity relative to the United States — a dynamic familiar from Mexico's long history of maintaining diplomatic relations with governments that Washington regards as adversaries. Whether FIFA would ever accept such a relocation, or whether it would set a precedent that other politically contentious nations might invoke, remains an open question. The precedent of the 1998 World Cup is instructive here: at that time, FIFA brokered a compromise over the pre-match handshake protocol that allowed the game to proceed with a degree of symbolic goodwill intact. In 2026, with active hostilities underway rather than merely frozen bilateral tensions, the scope for comparable symbolic gestures appears considerably narrower.

What this episode illustrates, above all, is the limits of the soft-power model when applied to mega sporting events in conditions of hard-power conflict. Nye's framework rests on the premise that attraction and persuasion can substitute for coercion, and that cultural and sporting events are among the most effective vehicles for projecting that attraction (Nye, 2004, 2008). The 1998 World Cup match between Iran and the United States appeared, momentarily, to validate this premise: the flowers exchanged before kick-off, the joint team photograph, and the warmth of the post-match interactions suggested that football could create diplomatic space where conventional diplomacy had failed. The 2026 case suggests the opposite: that when the geopolitical stakes are high enough, a sporting event ceases to be a space of soft power and becomes instead another arena in which hard power is exercised and contested. In Orwell's celebrated phrase, sport at this level of political intensity is simply "war minus the shooting" — and in 2026, the shooting itself is already underway.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has examined the intersection of football and geopolitics across three episodes of U.S.–Iran engagement — the 1998 World Cup in France, the 2000 friendly in Los Angeles, and the 2022 World Cup in Qatar — before turning to the unprecedented situation surrounding the 2026 FIFA World Cup. Several conclusions emerge from this analysis.

First, the history of U.S.–Iran football encounters demonstrates that sport diplomacy is most effective when both sides possess the political will to translate symbolic sporting gestures into official diplomatic action (Rajkiewicz, 2022). The 1998 match in Lyon created genuine diplomatic momentum, but that momentum was ultimately dissipated because the Iranian regime's internal divisions — between reformists willing to engage and conservatives hostile to any normalization — prevented a coherent follow-through (Hareuveny & Blanga, 2023). The 2000 friendly demonstrated that even when both governments were willing to allow their teams to meet, logistical and political obstacles could reduce what might have been a landmark occasion to a diplomatically inconclusive 1-1 draw. The lesson is not that sport diplomacy is ineffective, but that its effectiveness is contingent on political conditions that lie outside the control of sport's governing bodies.

Second, the analytical framework of hard, soft, and smart power (Nye, 2004, 2008, 2009; Brannagan et al., 2025) proves highly productive for understanding the multi-dimensional character of the 2026 crisis. The Trump administration's contradictory stance illustrates the difficulty of deploying smart power — the strategic combination of hard and soft instruments — when domestic political pressures pull in opposite directions. FIFA's insistence on "Plan A" reflects the institution's own soft-power interests in maintaining the appearance of political neutrality, but is constrained by the hard-power realities of host-nation sovereignty. Iran's dilemma between participation and withdrawal encapsulates the "soft disempowerment" risk that Brannagan et al. (2025) identify: the

possibility that engaging with a mega sporting event in hostile conditions damages rather than enhances a state's international standing.

Third, the 2026 case confirms the central argument of this paper and of prior work (Papanikos, 2023): that mega sporting events are not politically neutral spaces but powerful arenas in which national image, geopolitical interests, and media narratives are actively contested. The host nation's international relationships inevitably shape the political meaning of the tournament, regardless of the intentions of the organising body. Just as Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup brought scrutiny of its labour practices and regional alliances, the United States' co-hosting of 2026 has made Iran's participation a test case for the limits of sport's universalist aspirations in conditions of active military conflict. In this sense, the 2026 World Cup is not an exceptional case but a particularly stark illustration of dynamics that are inherent to the political economy of mega events.

Finally, the paper underscores a point that the existing literature on sport and geopolitics has not always sufficiently emphasized: the importance of distinguishing between the positions and interests of the multiple actors involved in any given episode of sport diplomacy. Governments, governing bodies, national football federations, individual players, and diaspora communities may each pursue different and sometimes contradictory objectives under the umbrella of a single international event. The 2026 crisis, with its divergent positions from the Trump administration, FIFA, the Iranian Football Federation, and Mexico's government, makes this multi-actor complexity unusually visible. Future research would benefit from a more systematic analysis of how these competing interests interact, and how their interaction shapes the ultimate political and diplomatic outcomes of mega sporting events.

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