

Graphika

Matching Interests

The Geopolitics of World Cup
Boycotts

Dina Sadek

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By Dina Sadek


Overview

The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup, held every four years, is one of the world's most anticipated and followed events. The multiweek tournament draws an enormously diverse audience, from soccer enthusiasts and sports fans to entertainment news followers and political analysts. According to FIFA's audience engagement [statistics](#), the 2022 World Cup reached five billion users across all platforms, indicating the competition's clear popularity among global audiences.

At the same time, the widely publicized event can ignite controversy, becoming a magnet for boycott calls and political debate. Ahead of the 2026 World Cup, jointly hosted by the U.S., Mexico, and Canada this summer, Graphika monitored online conversations across nine major social media platforms to contextualize boycott discourse targeting the tournament, analyze engagement patterns, and identify amplification efforts.

For the purpose of this report, we defined boycott-related material as online content that explicitly encourages, supports, or expresses refusal to attend, participate in, or support the World Cup, the participating countries, and host nations. We considered relevant content in Arabic, English, French, and Spanish. We identified calls that ranged from symbolic posts by individual users to advocacy by civil society groups and public figures. Our findings indicate that individual influential social media users help disseminate boycott-related discourse to large numbers of followers. However, we did not identify evidence of a centralized boycott movement coordinating across the main narratives.

Graphika's [intelligence reporting](#) provides insights into the critical themes and narratives behind backlash campaigns and targeted boycott calls by detecting, mapping, and analyzing online communities and the narratives that drive them. Our April 2026 report, "[From Consumers to Culture Wars](#)," examined how boycott campaigns targeting U.S. companies were developed and disseminated in online spaces. In alignment with our previous findings, this report determined that particularly influential social media accounts are key to shaping boycott calls and amplifying boycott campaigns.



This report discusses online discourse involving 2026 World Cup boycott calls from April 1, 2025, to April 30, 2026. We categorize this content into four main themes and examine their links to diplomatic and geopolitical interests between host countries and participating nations.

Key Findings

From April 2025 to April 2026, we found that online calls for boycotts centered around the World Cup primarily focused on discussions of FIFA and the tournament as political and profit-driven, human rights concerns, and geopolitical tensions. Our analysis suggests these calls emerged organically rather than as part of an organized effort or centralized campaign targeting the event. Boycott calls were largely driven by influential accounts, geopolitical flashpoints, rights concerns, and affordability grievances.

We identified four main themes relating to the World Cup boycott discussion:

- **Prohibitive Ticket and Travel Costs:** Expensive match tickets, combined with the high cost of travel, accommodation, and other logistics associated with attending matches in host cities, contributed to social media posts portraying the tournament as financially inaccessible to many fans. Online discussions also reflected concerns about the logistical and financial burdens on host cities and their residents during a high-revenue FIFA event, prompting some users to advocate for boycotting the tournament.
- **Travel Access and Visa Restrictions:** Recently implemented visa and travel restrictions to host nations, particularly the U.S., have raised concerns among online audiences about potential exclusion and selective access for fans during a global sports event. FIFA officials and players from participating teams also face the risk that their visas will be denied or not granted before the scheduled matches. This dynamic contributed to calls to boycott either the tournament as a whole or matches hosted in the U.S.
- **Human Rights, Security, and Safety Concerns:** U.S. and international rights and advocacy groups raised concerns ahead of the tournament about protest rights, discrimination, freedom of expression, and the treatment of foreign nationals in the U.S. due to increased immigration enforcement, detentions, and deportations. Online discussions reflected worries about potential over-policing of fans, activists, or marginalized communities during the tournament, with calls to boycott the event or matches held in the U.S.
- **Conflict, Diplomatic, and Political Considerations:** Geopolitical tensions between participating nations and host countries also contributed to boycott-related discourse. Discussions surrounding tensions between Iran, Israel, and the U.S. fueled calls among some online communities to boycott matches, specifically those hosted in the U.S., alongside

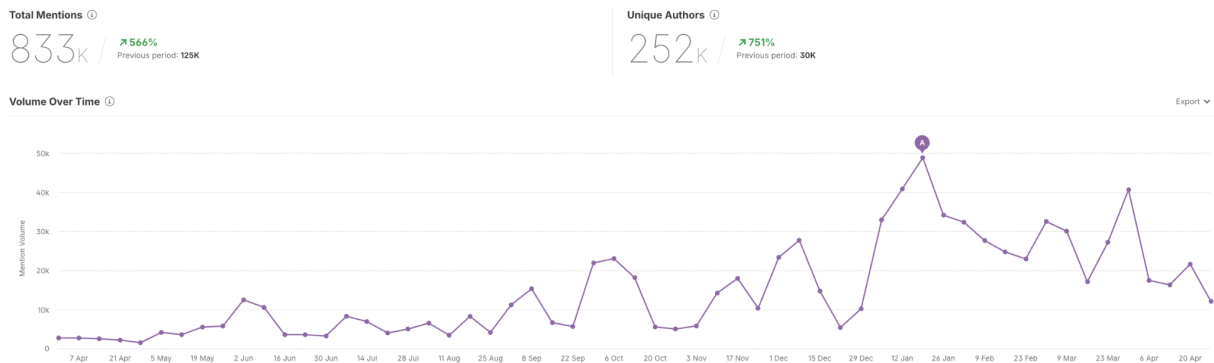
discussions of Iran’s ultimately unsuccessful request to relocate its matches outside the country, contributing to these calls for boycott.

Social Media Search and Analysis

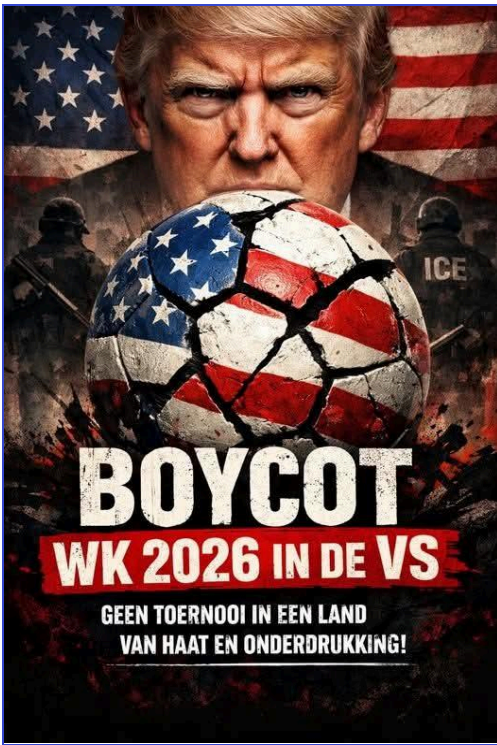
We conducted on-platform searches using relevant keywords and hashtags in four languages to surface content relevant to the discussion. We also used an English-language search query of neutral and negative terms, including mentions of boycotts, to search for boycott-related content between April 1, 2025, and April 30, 2026.

During this research, we observed a naturally fluctuating volume of content with a clear peak on Jan. 20, 2026. This surge in conversation was driven by media [reporting](#) and social media posts across major platforms about European countries potentially boycotting the World Cup due to the increased U.S. tariff threats and Denmark’s tensions with the U.S. over Greenland.


A limited number of influential accounts played a critical role in [amplifying](#) this content to larger audiences. We found that posts on X often received the most engagement. We identified three prominent X [accounts](#) — each [with](#) more than 500k followers — that posted claims about European nations considering boycotts. Three [posts](#) from these accounts [collectively](#) received nearly two million [views](#). Boycott narratives related to Greenland appeared to be driven more by political commentary and influential social media accounts than by concrete [steps](#) from [national](#) federations.



This graph shows the flow of online conversations about boycotting the 2026 World Cup between April 1, 2025, and April 30, 2026. The conversation reached a peak on Jan. 20, 2026, as users discussed a European boycott of the tournament in response to U.S. efforts to acquire Greenland. Source: Brandwatch.



Posters shared in reply to three X posts containing calls for a boycott of the World Cup or the U.S. Source: X.



We searched the same dataset for the term “boycott” to identify influential social media posts in the conversation and the actors who amplified them. Examples of these influential posts include:

- An Oct. 5, 2025, [post](#) by X geopolitical analysis account Warfare Analysis ([@warfareanalysis](#), 286k followers), calling for boycotting FIFA and all football and sports, ending the post with “You’re not a slave in the Roman Empire.” The post was viewed 491.2k times and shared 9.3k times.
- Occupy Democrats ([@OccupyDemocrats](#), 736.1k followers) called for a boycott of the World Cup in an X [post](#) on Jan. 12, 2026, that claimed that international fans are canceling their World Cup tickets to protest “violent immigration crackdown.” The post was viewed 333k times and shared 3.4k times.
- On Jan. 12, 2026, a [post](#) by X account Marlene Robertson ([@marlene4719](#), 118k followers), based in Ontario, Canada, shared a screenshot of an article claiming that nearly 17,000 fans are canceling their World Cup tickets due to the U.S. political climate. This post was viewed 1.2 million times and shared 6.8k times.
- Jürgen Nauditt ([@jurgen_nauditt](#), 113.8k followers), a participant of the North Atlantic Fella Organization (NAFO), a social movement dedicated to countering Russian propaganda about the war in Ukraine, [posted](#) on Jan. 17, 2026, on X about Germany considering boycotting the tournament over Greenland. The post garnered more than 1.1 million views and 4.7k shares.
- A March 28, 2026, LPC ([@landpalestine](#), 15k followers) [post](#) claimed that Spain announced that it will boycott the World Cup if Israel takes part. The post, which has been updated since with a Community Note citing media reporting that Israel was eliminated in a qualification match, has been viewed more than 4.4 million times and shared 7k times.

The engagement with these posts reflects the power wielded by influential accounts that can disseminate content to large and diverse audiences, potentially expanding the reach of boycott calls. We reviewed these social media posts and their engagement, along with other content posted over the past year, to identify the main themes in online discourse related to boycotts of the 2026 World Cup, as detailed in the following sections.

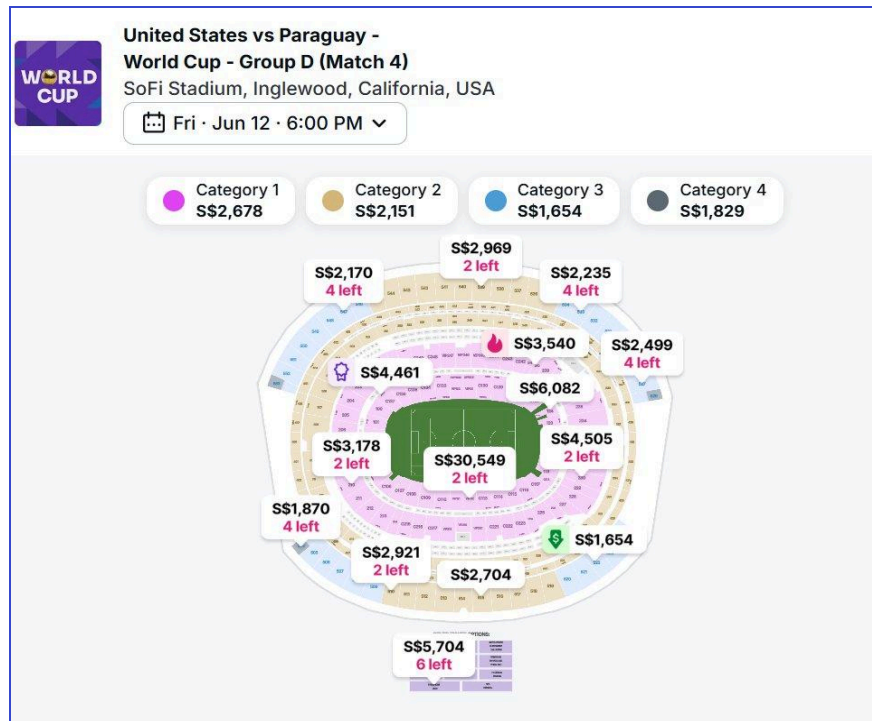
Prohibitive Ticket and Travel Costs

The steep cost of attending the matches at the 2026 World Cup is a key aspect of the criticism lodged at FIFA. The tournament is [expected](#) to feature the most expensive general admission tickets for a football match ever. The ticket price, paired with rising travel and accommodation costs, creates a significant barrier for fans in both host countries and those hoping to travel to the U.S., Canada, or Mexico for the tournament. Media reports of [lagging](#) sales for the World Cup opener pointed to high-priced [tickets](#) as the cause of falling demand.

FIFA's adoption of a dynamic pricing model for selling tickets has led to further criticism. Ahead of the release of tickets in [October](#) 2025, FIFA indicated that group-stage [tickets](#) will range from \$60 to \$6,730 and that prices will be [adjusted](#) based on demand following the December 2025 draw. By April 2026, the average [increase](#) in the lowest ticket category was over \$200. FIFA also [introduced](#) new, more expensive World Cup ticket categories in April. FIFA president Gianni Infantino has [justified](#) the pricing as part of a "special market" serving as the association's only [revenue](#)-generating event. Earlier in March, U.S. lawmakers [wrote](#) a letter to FIFA leadership expressing concern over rising costs for fans and host cities, and demanding that American [fans](#) and international visitors have access to tickets at affordable prices.

We observed social media posts discussing the high ticket prices as a major barrier to attending matches, with many noting that the cumulative cost is unaffordable when factoring in travel and accommodation to one of the host cities.

Social posts expressed dismay over steep pricing, with screenshots of [ticket](#) prices in post texts indicating the high [cost](#) as a barrier to fans. One X user [estimated](#) that the minimum cost for two people to attend the World Cup final at the MetLife Stadium in New Jersey is more than \$12,000, including two tickets, train fare to the stadium, and accommodation.



Screenshot of the price of tickets for a 2026 World Cup match in a social media post. Source: X.

Beyond match tickets, the cost of accommodation, transportation, and FIFA Fan Fest tickets in host cities sparked backlash from commuters, politicians, and fans hoping to attend World Cup matches and events. Politicians and local governments raised concerns about the burden placed on host cities as prices rise and tax-paying residents are being asked to subsidize a tournament from which FIFA expects record [revenue](#).

In New Jersey, the [round-trip](#) train [fare](#) from Manhattan to the MetLife Stadium will cost fans \$150, more than 10 times the regular [fare](#) of \$12.90 for the 15-minute ride or \$80 for shuttle bus seats. The rise in transportation costs sparked residents' and fans' backlash, prompting some fans to consider [walking](#) to the stadium to avoid the high transit costs, as the city's [governor](#) called on FIFA to cover the transportation costs. The decision continues to draw backlash and [concern](#) among fans about whether they can make it to the matches, especially since [parking](#) is not offered at the stadium, and ride-share drop-off options will be off-site, leaving fans with limited travel options. In Toronto, Canada, a \$10 CAD [admission](#) ticket to the city's FIFA Fan Fest, following the original announcement that it would be free, drew backlash, prompting the city's [mayor](#) to revisit the plan.

Accommodation in host cities is also sparking outrage among fans, with Airbnb and hotel rates spiking, leaving many fans without affordable options. Deterred [fans](#) due to the [cost](#) have led [demand](#) to fall short ahead of the World Cup, and U.S. hotels [slashed](#) rates as FIFA began canceling thousands of reserved rooms across the country.

Travel Access and Visa Restrictions

As the 2026 World Cup approaches, criticism has mounted over difficulties in obtaining visas to travel to host countries, particularly the U.S. These concerns involve football association [officials](#), participating national teams, and prospective audience members hoping to attend the matches. Due to the joint hosting of the tournament by three countries, criticism or calls for a boycott largely depend on the host countries' relationships with other nations and on how logistics are handled across the different host cities.

One of the main drivers of this criticism stems from the recently implemented travel restrictions to the U.S., which fully or partially suspended entry for and visa issuance for nationals of 39 [countries](#), and the [continuation](#) of the suspension on entry for nationals of 19 countries. Standing next to FIFA President Gianni Infantino, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio [stated](#) in November 2025 that a World Cup ticket “doesn't guarantee admission into the U.S.” and encouraged fans to apply for visas as soon as possible.

Additionally, the U.S. [imposed](#) a \$15,000 [bond](#) for nationals of 50 countries applying for a visitor visa. These [restrictions](#) will likely hinder certain fans' ability to attend matches due to the associated cost or the inability to [obtain](#) a visa for one or more of the host countries, and contribute to calls for boycotting the U.S. and attending World Cup matches there.

Concerns about visa issues affect fans, but may also prevent [players](#) from nations like [Iran](#) from participating in the event if they are impacted by visa restrictions. The U.S. [denied](#) visas to Iranian officials ahead of the tournament's lottery draw in December 2025, prompting Iran to [boycott](#) the draw. Previous visa denials, increased U.S. visa restrictions, and the ongoing tensions between the U.S. and Iran (discussed later in this report) are likely to remain integral to calls for boycotts.

We observed that some users reply to posts mentioning boycotts with posters that display boycott statements. These images vary, depending on a user's perspective on World Cup boycotts and the reasons behind them. Some of these posters clearly state that the boycott is against the U.S. by including specific language or imagery such as the U.S. flag or the Statue of Liberty.




Posters shared in social media posts containing calls for boycotts referencing the U.S. Source: X.

Visa restrictions have also impacted, to a lesser extent, individuals traveling to Canada and Mexico. In April 2026, Canada [denied](#) visas to officials of the Palestine Football Association ahead of the pre-World Cup meeting of FIFA member associations held in Vancouver on April 30, raising concerns about exclusion and feeding further calls for boycotts over visa difficulties. However, our research indicated that U.S. visa restrictions are central to the conversation.

Human Rights and Safety Concerns

World Cup-related boycotts targeting the U.S. specifically also centered on [concerns](#) for safety due to the rise of detention and deportation of [foreign](#) nationals in the U.S. and the deployment of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in many locations around the country.

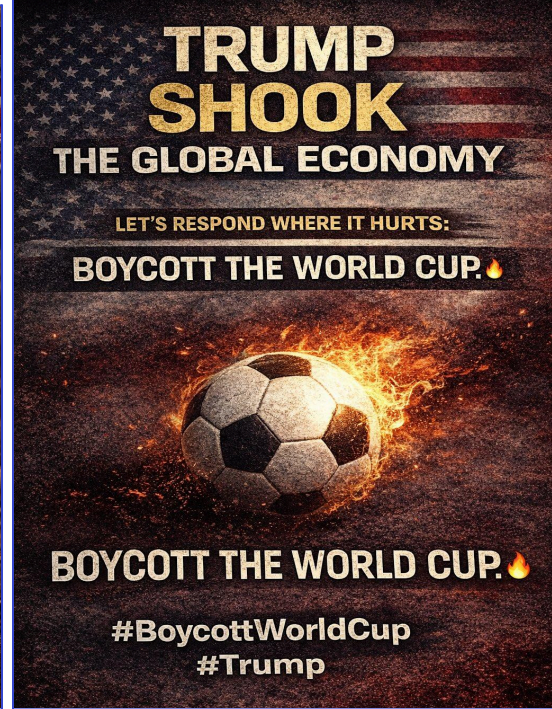
International human rights and advocacy organizations like the [American Civil Liberties Union](#), [Amnesty International](#), and [Human Rights Watch](#) warned of potential human rights issues and restrictions on freedom of expression, particularly in the U.S., ahead of the World Cup. In their statements, the organizations expressed concern over the safety of immigrants, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, and journalists, demanding that FIFA and host cities take appropriate action to protect people. The safety of foreign workers in the U.S. and fans traveling to attend matches has also been a topic of conversation, especially as the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) [confirmed](#) that ICE will work to secure some World Cup events.



We observed calls to boycott matches in the U.S., amplified on X by international fans who voiced their travel concerns and reposted media content about ICE actions or its presence in U.S. cities. We also observed posts from X accounts with large followings, such as a Feb. 3 X [post](#) from Antifa_Ultras ([@ultras_antifaa](#), 270.6k followers) and a May 18 [post](#) from European Democrats ([@democrats_eu](#), 23.3k followers), that amplified these calls for boycotting the World Cup and the U.S. within their respective communities.

Other criticisms came from labor and workers' defenders, especially in U.S. host cities, regarding workers' rights ahead of the event. A [union](#) representing workers at SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles [threatened](#) to strike if their working conditions, wage issues, and concerns about ICE were not addressed. Labor issues represented one of the clearest links between online boycott discourse and offline organizing, particularly in Los Angeles, where stadium workers threatened strike action over contract demands and immigration-enforcement concerns. One of the main actors leading online conversations about this issue is the [UNITE HERE Local 11](#) union, representing more than 32,000 hospitality workers in California and Arizona. Posts from the union's [X account](#) ([@unitehere11](#), 13.4k followers) tend to attract a large number of views, such as a May 18 [post](#) (34k views) about Tom Steyer being the first gubernatorial candidate in California to protest with workers against ICE, exceeding Steyer's own X [post](#) (3.9k views) on the same day about his participation in the protest.

Rights organizations also expressed concern about security and historical military deployment in [Mexico](#), and that the tournament may make conditions worse for [unhoused](#) people in Canada. However, the majority of the criticism and boycott calls we observed targeted the U.S.



Posters shared in social media posts containing calls for boycotts referencing the U.S. Source: X, Facebook, and TikTok.

Conflict and Political Opposition

The regional conflict in the Middle East has added another dimension to online discussion of the 2026 World Cup. The tense relationship between the U.S. and Iran, a qualifying member of the competition, is central to this conversation. Tensions that existed prior to the war due to the U.S. denying visas to Iranian officials have escalated with the conflict. Concerns have arisen over the safety of Iranian team members and their fans in the U.S., as well as their ability to obtain visas for the matches.

In March 2026, Iranian officials and commentators amplified [boycott](#)-related rhetoric during visa disputes and regional tensions with the U.S. However, Iranian football [authorities](#) later indicated that the national team would participate while continuing to seek guarantees around visas, safety, and treatment in the U.S. FIFA [denied](#) Iran's request to move its U.S.-scheduled matches to [Mexico](#). U.S. President Donald Trump [stated](#) that while the team is welcome to compete in the U.S., he doesn't [believe](#) that it is "appropriate that they be there, for their own life and safety." Despite the ongoing conflict and [uncertainty](#) about Iran's final position on its national team traveling to the U.S. for its scheduled matches, FIFA leadership [reiterated](#) in April that Iran will participate in the World Cup.

The conflict has provoked false and misleading claims of boycott efforts, such as the [claim](#) that Spain will withdraw its participation in the World Cup if [Israel](#) qualifies. A claim that Spain's government debunked and confirmed its country's participation in the tournament. Germany and France also [ruled out](#) World Cup boycotts, as fans and European [politicians](#) called for [boycotting](#) the U.S. over Greenland and the war with Iran.



Posters shared in social media posts about boycotting the U.S. over the war in Iran. Source: X.

Estimative Language Legend

Assessments of Likelihood

Graphika uses the following vocabulary to indicate the likelihood of a hypothesis proving correct. If we are unable to assess likelihood due to limited or non-existent information, we may use terms such as “suggest.”

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Real Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain(ly)
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%

Confidence Levels: Indicators of Sourcing and Corroboration

Graphika uses confidence levels to indicate the quality of information, sources, and corroboration underpinning our assessments.

Low Confidence	Medium Confidence	High Confidence
Assessment based on information from a non-trusted source and/or information we have not been able to independently corroborate.	Assessment based on information that we are unable to sufficiently corroborate and/or information open to multiple interpretations.	Assessment based on information from multiple trusted sources that we are able to fully corroborate.



About Us

Graphika is the most trusted provider of actionable open-source intelligence to help organizations stay ahead of emerging online events and make decisions on how to navigate them. Led by prominent innovators and technologists in the field of online discourse analysis, Graphika supports global enterprises and public sector customers across trust & safety, cyber threat intelligence, and strategic communications spanning industries including intelligence, technology, media and entertainment, and global banking. Graphika continually integrates new and emerging technologies into our proprietary intelligence platform and analytic services, empowering our customers with high-precision intelligence and confidence to operate in a complex and continuously evolving information environment.

For more information or to request a demo, [visit](#) our website.

