



# The Terrorist Threat to the 2026 World Cup

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## THE ISSUE

*The 2026 World Cup will be the largest sporting event ever held—and a magnet for terrorists of all stripes. Major sporting events have long attracted a range of foreign terrorist groups and domestic extremists looking to bring their grievances to the fore or simply sow death and destruction. The most likely danger to the 2026 World Cup comes from a domestic lone actor or small group striking soft targets around the matches: fan zones, transit corridors, hotel and restaurant districts, and the queues outside stadium gates. The threats facing the tournament are real and diffuse, but so are the countermeasures arrayed against them.*

In this summer's World Cup tournament, 48 teams will play 104 matches across 16 host cities over 39 days, with the United States hosting 78 games and Canada and Mexico 13 each. For millions of spectators attending the games and billions of fans watching around the world, this is a nail-biting saga of triumph and loss playing out on a global stage.

That stage draws terrorists. Major sporting events have long attracted jihadists, ethnonationalist chauvinists, malign states, and a range of domestic extremists looking to exploit global attention to advance a cause, force their grievances onto the world's agenda, or simply sow death and destruction.

For counterterrorism officials with experience securing large-scale, single-day, and single-location events, protecting the World Cup poses a particularly difficult challenge. Protection for the World Cup must stretch out across the country—even the continent—and be sustained over many weeks. In addition, potential targets

are numerous and varied. Although police and security officers can control access to key venues (e.g., searching match attendees before they enter the stadium), there will be crowds everywhere: gathering in front of the stadium to queue for security, riding in public transportation to and from the game, and coming together with their fellow fans in and around hotels, bars, and restaurants. Security everywhere is impossible, and that reality creates many potential soft targets.

Security officials are aware of these dangers and have been working aggressively to mitigate them. In the United States, attacks on sporting mega-events are exceedingly rare. Terrorist groups and radicalized individuals have many weaknesses and vulnerabilities that can—and have been—exploited by counterterrorism officials, and fans can attend the World Cup confident that those officials have worked hard to ensure their safety.

This brief examines the terrorism threat to the 2026 World Cup. It first details the range of potential attack-

ers, examining both foreign-based and domestic threats. Next, it details the types of attacks that are most likely to occur based on trends in terrorism data and the current global security environment. It then examines the various counterterrorism mitigation efforts that are already well underway to prepare for the tournament and concludes with what is at stake for the World Cup and other major sporting events that will follow.

## FOREIGN-BASED THREATS

The international terrorist threat picture is diffuse. In 2026, no one foreign organization presents the kind of singular, overriding threat that al Qaeda did after 9/11 or the Islamic State, also known as ISIS, did at the height of its external operations in the 2010s. Although this is a welcome development, several categories of foreign actors remain who could see attacking the World Cup as useful for different reasons: (1) jihadist groups seeking attention and casualties, (2) hostile states seeking disruption or retaliation, (3) militants tied to overseas conflicts seeking to internationalize their grievances, and (4) criminal organizations, especially those in Mexico, seeking leverage over or revenge against their own governments.

History offers many warnings. The 1972 Munich Summer Olympics attack, in which Palestinian terrorists killed nine Israeli athletes and a German policeman after a multiday hostage standoff, was perhaps the most famous terrorist operation in history until 9/11.<sup>1</sup> With every major media outlet already in Munich to cover the games, the hostage-taking seized global attention and put the Palestinian cause on the map. Abu Daoud, one of the planners, observed, “If we can, we have to squeeze our cause in 500 million houses all over the world.”<sup>2</sup>

Sporting events have remained targets ever since. Algerian jihadists plotted to bomb matches at the 1998 World Cup in France.<sup>3</sup> ISIS attacked the Stade de France during a France-Germany soccer match in 2015 and later plotted against the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris.<sup>4</sup> Kurdish militants struck a Turkish stadium in 2016.<sup>5</sup> Hostile states have joined in: Russian military intelligence has targeted every Olympics in the past decade with cyber operations—with the notable exception of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing.<sup>6</sup> Russia is also suspected of plotting physical sabotage or an attack targeting the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris; in July 2024 a Russian national with reported ties to Russia’s Federal Security Service and Main Intelligence Directorate was arrested in Paris.<sup>7</sup>

Most of the ideologies behind past attacks continue to pose an active threat. The most active state sponsor of terrorism, Iran, may seek revenge for the U.S. and Israeli killing of more than 250 Iranian leaders. Iran could also strike to demonstrate that the United States, Israel, or their allies will pay a price for the war, thus trying to increase deterrence against future actions.<sup>8</sup> On May 15, the Department of Justice announced the arrest of Mohammad Baqer Saad Dawood al-Saadi, a senior member of Kataib Hezbollah, an Iraqi group with close ties to Iran. Saadi planned to target synagogues and Jewish centers in Arizona, Los Angeles, and New York.<sup>9</sup> It is easy to imagine similar attacks targeting the World Cup. The dispute over Iran’s World Cup presence reflects this concern: The International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) insists Iran must participate, while the Trump administration has warned that trainers and journalists tied to the regime’s security services will not be admitted.<sup>10</sup>

Iran is not the only state-level concern. Russia has orchestrated sabotage and arson operations across Europe in recent years, and an event on U.S. soil would offer similar opportunities to disrupt festivities and embarrass Washington.<sup>11</sup> Mexican cartels, newly designated as foreign terrorist organizations by the United States, have their own incentives after sustained U.S. and Mexican pressure on their leaderships. In February, for example, Mexican authorities killed Nemesio Rubén Oseguera Cervantes (“El Mencho”), the leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, leading parts of Mexico to erupt in retaliatory violence.<sup>12</sup> The World Cup’s southern matches put fans and infrastructure within their easy operational reach.

The jihadist threat from foreign groups, though degraded in recent years, remains. Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), the Islamic State’s Afghanistan-based affiliate, remains the most externally focused branch, having attempted attacks in Europe as recently as 2024.<sup>13</sup> Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) helped advise the attacker in the 2019 shooting at Naval Air Station Pensacola.<sup>14</sup> And the Somalia-based al Shabaab, the only African group known to have plotted a mass-casualty attack against the U.S. homeland, planned a 9/11-style plot disrupted in 2019.<sup>15</sup>

The international character of the tournament compounds the security problem. As the head of World Cup security put it, “The World Cup is the world stage, and it is a microcosm of everything that’s happening in the world. . . . Those 48 teams

don't check their politics at the door. They don't leave their issues at home, nor do their fans."<sup>16</sup> Colombia, Ecuador, Iraq, and other competing states face active violence or insurgencies at home, and those conflicts can travel with teams or surface within U.S.-based diasporas.

## U.S. DOMESTIC THREATS

The lone actor—typically radicalized online, operating with little or no organizational direction and using readily accessible weapons against soft targets—has been the dominant domestic terrorism threat in the post-9/11 era in the United States.<sup>17</sup> Domestic terrorist movements in the United States lack the centralized leadership, training infrastructure, and funding networks that enable foreign groups to coordinate complex operations. As a result, within the United States, the threat from any given attack is shaped overwhelmingly by the intent and competence of the individual (or small group) involved, not by any organization's capability. The deadliest jihadist attack on U.S. soil since 2016, the Bourbon Street car-ramming on New Year's Day 2025—in which a U.S.-born Army veteran inspired by Islamic State propaganda killed 14 people—involved no foreign support.<sup>18</sup>

CSIS data on U.S. terrorist incidents over the past three decades reveals that the grievances motivating attackers are highly diverse, with the dominant ideologies varying over time.<sup>19</sup> For example, while antiabortion violence dominated U.S. terrorism in the 1990s, it has since receded. Jihadist attacks peaked in the 2010s, but have declined since the territorial defeat of the Islamic State in 2019, though such attacks remain disproportionately lethal when they do occur.<sup>20</sup> White supremacist violence has been a persistent feature for decades, producing some of the deadliest mass-casualty attacks of the past 10 years.<sup>21</sup> Anti-government and partisan extremism (violence against a person's political opponents, including high-profile figures) have surged more recently.<sup>22</sup> Other motivations, such as anti-LGBTQ+, anti-Muslim, and anti-Semitic violence, also appear with regularity. In addition, attackers are increasingly blending grievances that defy easy ideological categorization, further complicating analyses. For example, Patrick Crusius, who killed 23 at an El Paso Walmart in 2019, and Payton Gendron, who killed 10 at a Buffalo supermarket in 2022, each justified their attacks in manifestos fusing white supremacist replacement theory with arguments about immigration causing environmental degradation.<sup>23</sup>

Past attacks on sporting events and other large public gatherings in the United States have come from across the ideological spectrum, a diversity that is itself a warning: The next threat could emerge from a broad range of causes. The cases below span both direct attacks on sporting events and attacks on events that had the kinds of crowds and festivities that the World Cup will draw across its host cities:

- In 1996, Eric Rudolph detonated a backpack pipe bomb in Atlanta's Centennial Olympic Park during the Summer Games, killing one and wounding more than 100. Rudolph was an antiabortion extremist seeking, in his words, "to confound, anger and embarrass the Washington government in the eyes of the world for its abominable sanctioning of abortion on demand."<sup>24</sup>
- In 2013, Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev—brothers self-radicalized in part through jihadist propaganda—detonated two pressure-cooker bombs near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, killing three and wounding more than 260. The plot was inspired, but not directed, by foreign terrorists.<sup>25</sup>
- In 2019, Santino Legan opened fire at the Gilroy Garlic Festival in California with a semiautomatic rifle, killing three before being shot by police. He had posted white supremacist content online days before the attack.<sup>26</sup>
- In 2023, Tibet Ergul and Chance Brannon were arrested for plotting a remotely detonated explosives attack at Dodger Stadium during an LGBTQ+ Pride Night.<sup>27</sup>
- In 2024, Marvin Jalo, a 17-year-old who claimed support from individuals he believed to be Islamic State sympathizers, was arrested for plotting to bomb the Phoenix Pride Festival with explosives strapped to drones.<sup>28</sup>
- Also in 2024, Mark Adams Prieto was arrested for plotting a mass shooting at a rap concert at Atlanta's State Farm Arena. He selected the venue specifically because, in his telling, the concert would draw many Black attendees, and the attack could help spark a race war.<sup>29</sup>

When Eric Rudolph bombed the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, antiabortion violence was the most common form of terrorism in the United States. In 2026, there are several widespread grievances which could prove relevant to the World Cup.

Anti-government violence surged in 2025, much of it tied to immigration enforcement by police and Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials—a grievance that the visible deployment of armed state, local, and federal personnel around tournament venues could easily channel toward World Cup targets.<sup>30</sup> Partisan extremism has climbed steadily since 2016 and shows no signs of abating.<sup>31</sup> The risk of political violence is compounded by FIFA’s visible alignment with the Trump administration: FIFA’s President Gianni Infantino’s frequent White House appearances alongside the president and FIFA’s creation of a “peace prize” awarded to Trump make it plausible that some attackers will perceive the tournament as a Trump-branded target.<sup>32</sup>

Conflicts in the Middle East involving the United States and Israel continue to spill into U.S.-based violence. Recent cases include the May 2025 shooting of two Israeli embassy staff in Washington by Elias Rodriguez who declared, “I did it for Palestine, I did it for Gaza” after his arrest; Mohamed Soliman’s June 2025 firebombing of a Boulder march for Israeli hostages, which killed one and wounded seven; Cody Balmer’s April 2025 arson at Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro’s residence, which Balmer told police was retaliation for Shapiro’s stance on Gaza; Ndiaga Diagne’s March 2026 mass shooting at an Austin bar, carried out the day after the United States and Israel killed Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and committed by a gunman wearing Iranian-flag clothing and the words “Property of Allah”; and Ayman Ghazali’s March 2026 car-ramming and shooting at a Detroit-area synagogue, executed a week after Ghazali lost relatives in an Israeli airstrike on Lebanon and framed by the attacker himself as vengeance.<sup>33</sup> The U.S. and Israeli war with Iran, with on-again, off-again hostilities continuing as the World Cup approaches, will only deepen the grievances driving this violence. Iran’s qualification for the tournament gives those grievances a recurring focal point on U.S. soil.

White supremacists may also see opportunity in the tournament’s demographic profile. Prieto, for example, selected an Atlanta concert specifically because he expected a large Black audience. White supremacists more broadly have repeatedly targeted venues that concentrate non-white crowds. A tournament drawing millions of fans from all over the world to 16 host cities offers that target environment at unprecedented scale.

Anti-LGBTQ+ extremists may also see the tournament as a target. Recent years have seen Pride events recurrently

targeted, including the 2023 Dodger Stadium plot during Pride Night and the 2024 plot against the Phoenix Pride Festival. The 2026 World Cup schedule creates a particularly visible case in Seattle, where a game between Egypt and Iran is scheduled during the city’s PrideFest weekend and has been dubbed by tournament organizers as the “Pride Match.” National federations from both countries have formally protested, though Seattle’s organizing committee has said the celebrations will go forward as planned.<sup>34</sup> A high-visibility Pride-themed match between two teams from countries that criminalize or prosecute homosexuality, along with the surrounding celebrations and gatherings, is the kind of event anti-LGBTQ extremists may seek to attack.

## TYPES OF ATTACKS AND TARGET VULNERABILITIES

The most likely terrorist threat to the World Cup is the kind that has dominated U.S. terrorism for the past decade: a lone actor or small cell using firearms, vehicles, or improvised explosives against a soft target. Less likely is a sophisticated, foreign-conducted or foreign-directed operation of the kind ISIS executed on the Stade de France in 2015. The geographic, intelligence, and operational barriers that have prevented foreign groups from striking inside the United States in the decades since 9/11 remain intact. But vigilance remains necessary. A tournament drawing the world’s attention for 39 days creates exactly the kind of high-payoff target that justifies the operational risk for groups such as AQAP, ISKP, and al Shabaab, or a hostile state such as Iran, to act. The likelihood of a foreign-directed attack remains low, but not low enough that security officials can write it off—indeed, it is their vigilance that makes such attacks less likely.

The tournament’s structure shapes which targets are at greatest risk. Stadiums themselves will be among the hardest targets in North America during the matches. In the United States, the final at MetLife Stadium has been designated a National Special Security Event—the highest federal security tier, triggering a centralized Secret Service-led operation with hardened perimeters, magnetometer screening, FAA-enforced flight restrictions, counter-drone systems, and continuous counterterrorism monitoring across federal, state, and local agencies. The remaining 77 U.S. matches have been assigned Special Event Assessment Rating 1 or 2 designations, meaning they are treated

as nationally significant security events requiring extensive intelligence support, protective planning, emergency preparedness, and security integration across federal, state, and local agencies.<sup>35</sup>

Everything surrounding the stadium, however, is at greater risk: the crowds queuing for security, the fan zones and watch parties drawing spectators with fewer security measures, the transit corridors moving fans to and from venues, the hotel and bar districts where supporters cluster, and the high-profile individuals—players, coaches, dignitaries, and others—who move between them. Each presents a different kind of opportunity for a determined attacker.

**Stadium Perimeters and Ingress Points:** The points of greatest vulnerability at a stadium are the queues and chokepoints outside, not the fields or the seats inside. Crowds gathering to pass through magnetometers concentrate hundreds, even thousands, of people in unscreened space—a target location that has drawn attackers before. The 2015 Stade de France attack, in which ISIS bombers detonated suicide vests at stadium entrances during a France-Germany match, is the clearest analogue. The Boston Marathon bombing followed similar logic, with the attackers striking a soft point at an event with a large police presence. A vehicle ramming, an improvised explosive device (IED), and a firearms attack at a stadium ingress point are all among the most plausible high-casualty scenarios at the tournament.

**Fan Zones and Watch Parties:** FIFA's fan zones—large public viewing areas with food, entertainment, and screens—will draw crowds across host cities, often with looser security than the stadiums themselves. This kind of high-density, lightly secured event space could appeal to attackers. In addition, fan zones are likely to concentrate fans of particular teams in one location, increasing the risk of terrorism in the name of a grievance directed at that particular community. Some host cities have pulled back on these gatherings: San Francisco and New Jersey have canceled planned outdoor fan fests, reportedly in large part because of security costs.<sup>36</sup>

**Transit, Hotels, and Gathering Areas:** Crowds traveling to and from matches will fill metro lines, train stations, and downtown corridors. Hotels hosting teams or large fan contingents, and the bars and restaurants where supporters concentrate, present a wide array of targets with varying levels of security. The March 2016 pro-Iran Austin bar shooting illustrates the basic profile: a lone attacker,

an easily accessible weapon, and an open location.<sup>37</sup> The geographic distribution of fan activity across each host city will create dozens of such locations during every matchday.

**High-Profile Individual Targets:** Players, coaches, FIFA officials, visiting heads of state, and other dignitaries present a separate threat profile. The multiple assassination attempts against President Trump and other leading U.S. officials, both Republican and Democrat, in recent years illustrate the risk of determined attackers striking at semi-public events, even with security measures. Still, the heavy protective details that surround many of these figures—close security personnel, advance work, hardened transit, and controlled access—make them among the least likely targets to be successfully struck during the tournament.

Across all of these varied target sets, a secondary risk compounds the first. Even an attack that kills no or few victims can trigger panic and a stampede in densely packed spaces, killing or injuring additional people. The 2017 Manchester Arena bombing illustrated this dynamic: The suicide bomb in the venue's foyer killed 22 directly, and witnesses described concertgoers being knocked down and trampled as the crowd fled the arena, though no fatalities from the crush itself were reported.<sup>38</sup> In Iraq in 2005, unfounded rumors of a suicide bomber on a crowded bridge prompted a stampede in which almost 1,000 people died.<sup>39</sup>

Firearms have caused the most fatalities in U.S. terrorism in the decades since 9/11 by far, vehicles are the second most popular mass-casualty tool against public crowds, and IEDs, while difficult to build and rarely used successfully in the United States, remain attractive to attackers seeking dramatic, visual destruction. Drones are increasingly a wild card. States such as Russia and Iran and sophisticated non-state actors including Hezbollah, Kataib Hezbollah, and ISIS use them in their wars overseas. A handful of lone attackers in the United States in recent years from across the ideological spectrum have attempted to use them to deliver explosives, though none have succeeded and the airspace in cities is increasingly secured against the drone threat.<sup>40</sup>

## MITIGATING FACTORS

Despite these risks, several factors lessen the danger of terrorism at the World Cup.

When it comes to foreign groups, the post-9/11 counterterrorism architecture has proven effective at reducing the danger. Global intelligence cooperation, military pressure on safe havens, financial disruption, and partnerships

with foreign governments have weakened once-formidable groups, and, as a result, jihadist organizations are shadows of their former selves. Attacks conducted or directed by foreign groups on U.S. soil have been rare since 9/11, and when domestic actors have reached out to foreign operatives for guidance, those contacts have more often led to arrests than to attacks.

Foreign states must worry about escalation, making them more cautious about stirring up trouble in the United States. Although the U.S. and Israeli war with Iran poses an existential threat to the Iranian regime, the United States has only used part of its power so far. Notably, it has not put troops on the ground in Iran. In addition, domestic U.S. support for the war is low, and Iran is well aware of this.<sup>41</sup> A terrorist attack on U.S. soil might rally Americans and lead to escalation against Iran, making it harder for Iran to achieve a favorable war settlement. Finally, the devastation of Iran's leadership and the clear penetration by U.S. and Israeli intelligence probably have hindered Iran's ability to use terrorism abroad—which may be why Tehran has turned to Kataib Hezbollah, not its own operatives or its longstanding partner the Lebanese Hezbollah, to plot attacks. Russia faces a similar logic. Putin has already extracted much of what he wanted from the Trump administration related to the war in Ukraine, and an attack inside the United States risks pushing Washington back toward Kyiv. Though these factors do not eliminate the threat from state actors, they do narrow it.

Domestic terrorists, the most likely source of an attack, are constrained both by their own limited competence as well as broader counterterrorism measures. Radicalized individuals often post their intentions on social media, confide in unreliable acquaintances, or otherwise give themselves away. Many extremists also have regular encounters with law enforcement on unrelated grounds—narcotics, domestic abuse, firearms violations, and other offenses—and frequently trade information for leniency. If law enforcement maintains broad threat awareness, many plots can be disrupted before they mature. Social media and other technology companies can also play an important role, as many would-be terrorists boast about the operations they intend to conduct or otherwise use the internet for their plans. Equally important, most domestic attackers have little to no operational training. They are therefore more likely to make mistakes, get caught in the planning phase, or execute attacks that fail or kill fewer people than

intended. Most of the deadliest terrorist attacks in modern history have been carried out by trained operatives—and the absence of that capability is a meaningful constraint on what most lone actors can achieve. The Bourbon Street attack is a reminder that the constraint is not absolute, but it remains a common limitation.

Most importantly, security officials in the United States, Canada, and Mexico are aware of the risks and are trying to guard against a wide array of threats. FIFA has stood up a dedicated trilateral planning structure, with a foundational “Safety and Security Concept” defining 18 common areas of focus and strategic objectives that every host city has agreed to deliver. Decisionmaking is dispersed to the venues, with the FIFA Tournament Operations Center reserving authority for issues that cross host cities. An International Police Cooperation Center outside Washington consolidates intelligence from the National Football Information Point officers of participating countries, channeling it through fusion centers, the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Royal Canadian Mounted Police Intelligence, and Mexico's Center for National Intelligence. Counter-drone capabilities—newly extended to state and local law enforcement under the 2025 Safer Skies Act—are being coordinated by a dedicated FIFA airspace security team across all three host nations.<sup>42</sup> FIFA has also committed \$625 million to additional security funding for U.S. host cities, routed through FEMA.<sup>43</sup>

In April, the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), FBI, and DHS jointly published a series of unclassified guidance documents specifically about fan-zone security, hospitality and nightlife venue threats, rail infrastructure protection, and the safeguarding of high-profile figures at public events. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence has stood up an Intelligence and Threat Working Group with the FBI and DHS focused on the tournament, and NCTC will provide direct intelligence support to host cities before and during play.<sup>44</sup>

However, security preparation for the World Cup has also faced setbacks. The 76-day DHS funding shutdown in spring 2026 delayed host-city grant funding. The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency—which coordinates protection of critical infrastructure including transit, communications, and event networks—lost roughly a third of its staff, and the Transportation Security Administration, slated to screen fans at stadium entrances in addition to its airport duties, lost nearly 8 percent of its workforce during the shutdown.<sup>45</sup>

The Paris Olympics in 2024 demonstrated what comprehensive prevention architecture can accomplish: French authorities disrupted three major terrorist plots before the games, conducted more than 900 administrative searches, placed over 700 individuals under enhanced monitoring, and intercepted 90 unauthorized drones—and the games concluded without a major terrorist incident.<sup>46</sup> Across the World Cup’s 16 host cities, similar mobilization is underway.

## THE STAKES

The measure of a successful World Cup, from a security standpoint, will be invisible: an absence of incidents and a tournament remembered for exciting games and stunning athleticism. The World Cup exists to bring billions of people together in a shared experience of sport and culture. Terrorism, whatever its underlying cause, depends on the opposite—on reshaping how people gather and what they feel safe doing. A tournament that feels celebratory rather than fearful is its own form of victory.

What is built in the next year will outlast the tournament itself. The 2028 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles and the 2034 Winter Games in Salt Lake City will face many of the same threats, and the architecture being stood up now will be the foundation for handling them. The threats facing the World Cup tournament are real and diffuse. But so are the countermeasures arrayed against them. If all goes as planned, the story of the summer of 2026 will be who lifts the trophy at the final match. ■

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