

Sportswashing and the Global Attention Economy: Can Mega Events Mask Concurrent Geopolitical Crises?

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In 2014, the hype surrounding football's mega event, the FIFA World Cup, was on another level as the spiritual home of football hosted the tournament. The entire world was captivated by the rhythm of football. During this period, Israel launched Operation Protective Edge, bombarding Gaza and killing civilians. The deaths of innocent Gazans failed to attract as much global attention as the greatest show did. The World Cup did not cause the conflict; however, the media attention and narratives surrounding the tournament contributed to the crisis being overshadowed. This is one of the ways in which sport can be weaponized by politics.

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“Don’t mix politics with sport” sounds somewhat cliché, as sport has long been used to build positive national images, advance propaganda, and expand soft power which is termed as sportswashing. In broader terms, sportswashing refers to the use of sport and its associated global prestige by governments or organizations to sanitize reputations, deflect scrutiny from human rights abuses, and launder their image on the world stage². The term itself is relatively new; a portmanteau of “sports” and “whitewash” coined in 2015 to describe Azerbaijan’s use of the inaugural European Games to divert attention from its silencing of journalists and political activists³. It was mainstreamed around the time Russia hosted the FIFA World Cup in 2018 when Amnesty International applied it amid criticism over its annexation of Crimea and the Salisbury poisoning scandal. But its practice can be traced back nearly a century.

The attention economy lies at the core of sportswashing. It allows the actors to create an ecosystem of sportswashing. The mechanism is simple. Broadcasters need audiences. Advertisers need attention. Governments need narratives. The sport governing bodies need revenue and legitimacy. All of these interests converge in a mega-event that presents the world as a stage. The mega-sporting events are uniquely effective at monopolizing this attention. In such an environment, public sentiment and collective attention can easily be transformed into tools of soft power and image-building. At the same time, this attention can be used to conceal the realities unfolding beyond the sporting stage.

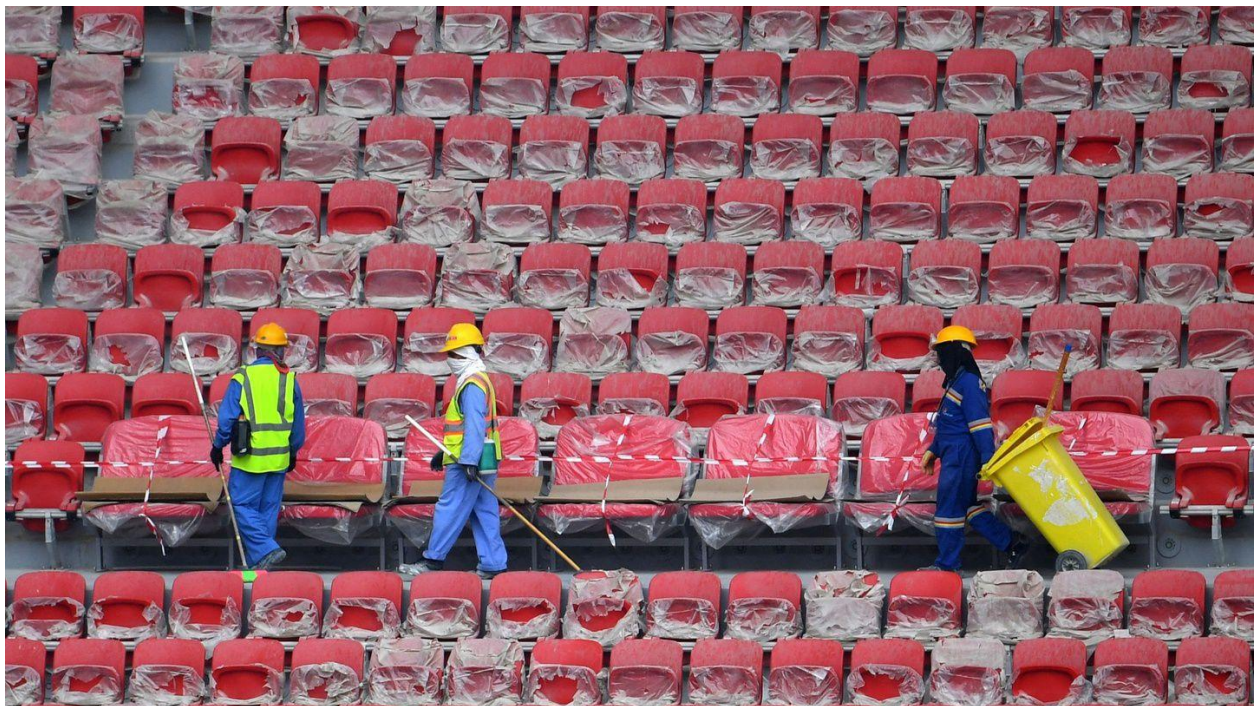
The 2026 FIFA World Cup arrives amid extraordinary global tension. There is an active war involving the United States and Iran which continues to shape the geopolitical backdrop of the tournament. The whole Middle East region is in conflict. At the same time, several regions across the world encounter conflict and instability. Yet the World Cup once again draws immense global attention. Now that the largest world cup kicks off amid an active war, a simple question arises: who benefits from sportswashing?

² Fred Frommer, “Sportswashing,” *Britannica Money*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/money/sportswashing>.

³ Monica Sainz, “What Is Sportswashing? Its Impact on Global Sports Integrity,” *American Public University*, June 17, 2025, <https://www.apu.apus.edu/area-of-study/nursing-and-health-sciences/resources/what-is-sportswashing/>.

Cases of Sportswashing

The practice of sportswashing dates back to 1936. Hitler used the Berlin Olympics, as a golden opportunity to present a new peaceful-tolerant-modern Germany. It was a well-established deception to earn legitimacy of the Nazi regime in the global arena⁴. Sportswashing works because a mega sports events are a very few platforms that brings the people across the world together regardless of the differences. Nations celebrate identity in the global arena. Therefore, for countries or governments seeking to reposition themselves in the international imagination, there is no more efficient platform.



Source: The Irish Times

Russia utilized this when it hosted the 2018 World Cup. Despite annexing Crimea in 2014, supporting Bashar al-Assad in Syria, shooting down Malaysia Airlines flight MH17, and executing the nerve-agent poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury just months before the tournament, Russia went ahead as host without any meaningful disruptions. It used the event to counter the propaganda surrounding its global reputation and create a clean image of hospitality.

⁴ Kellie B. Gormly, "How the 1936 Berlin Olympics Became a Nazi Showcase," *History*, July 16, 2024, last updated May 28, 2025, <https://www.history.com/articles/1936-olympics-hitler-nazi-party>.

Qatar elevated this practice to something almost staggering. The Qatar Investment Authority spent an estimated \$220 billion on World Cup infrastructure, in exchange generated only \$7.5 billion in FIFA revenue in return⁵. The return, however, was not financial. It was reputational and geopolitical. Qatar used football as an instrument of soft power to secure global recognition. It helped the country to reposition itself beyond its identity as an oil-rich Gulf state to a modern secure country, breaking the stereotype. The tournament's spectacular organization, modern infrastructure, and fan experience generated largely positive reactions worldwide. The success of the event sidelined the concerns over migrant workers' rights, human rights, and discriminatory policies against the LGBTQ+ community. Yet the tournament brought geopolitical gains. It elevated Qatar's international profile, boosted tourism and foreign investment. As the first World Cup held in the Arab and Muslim world, it became more than a sporting event. It showed how a country can leverage a global sporting event to exercise nation branding and global influence.

China's 2008 Beijing Olympics and 2022 Winter Olympics followed this as well. These mega-events projected an as a positive and confident image. This structural complicity is more visible in the 2026 World Cup. The Trump administration has made it clear that it views the tournament as more than just a sporting event. It intends to use the event as a tool of diplomacy and influence, and hopes to use the global attention it attracts to boost investment, strengthen America's image abroad, and advance strategic interests^{6 7}.

When Politics and Sport Collide

Sportswashing can also operate through the global sports governance institutions. If hosting tournaments can help launder a state's image, the selective enforcement of sporting sanctions can do the same. There is inherent political motivation to decide who to ban, who remains welcome, and whose actions are deemed incompatible with the values of sport. This makes the sports governance itself part of the sportswashing ecosystem.

⁵ Adam Lyjak, "The Finances Behind the 2022 World Cup," *Michigan Journal of Economics*, January 10, 2023, <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mje/2023/01/10/the-finances-behind-the-2022-world-cup/>.

⁶ "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Establishes White House Task Force on the FIFA World Cup 2026," *The White House*, March 7, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/03/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-establishes-white-house-task-force-on-the-fifa-world-cup-2026/>.

⁷ Noah Berman, "The U.S. Is Co-Hosting the World Cup. But Much of the World Can't Attend," Council on Foreign Relations, June 9, 2026, <https://www.cfr.org/article/us-co-hosting-world-cup-much-world-cant-attend>.

International sport has never been truly separate from politics. Sporting bodies have often influenced international affairs by suspending, excluding, or boycotting countries and athletes. Historically, the Olympics have functioned as a barometer of geopolitical behavior. The first post-World War I Olympics in 1920 excluded Germany, Turkey, Hungary, Austria, and Bulgaria because of their roles in the war⁸. South Africa was banned from the Tokyo 1964 Olympics and later expelled from the International Olympic Committee over its apartheid policies⁹. FIFA similarly suspended and eventually expelled South Africa from international football. Afghanistan was banned from the Sydney 2000 Games because the Taliban prohibited women from participating in sport¹⁰. More recently, Russia was also excluded from major international sporting competitions following its invasion of Ukraine, including FIFA tournaments and the 2026 Milan-Cortina Winter Olympics.



Source: The Independent

⁸ Katharina Buchholz, "Russia Banned From Olympic Games for Over 10 Years," *Statista*, February 5, 2026, <https://www.statista.com/chart/35791/nations-ever-banned-from-participating-in-olympic-summer-winter-games/>.

⁹ "Why Was South Africa Barred from the Olympics for More Than 20 Years Due to Apartheid?" *Olympics.com*, February 11, 2022, <https://olympics.com/en/news/why-south-africa-barred-from-the-olympics-apartheid>.

¹⁰ "Countries Banned from the Olympics 2026," *World Population Review*, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-banned-from-olympics>.

On the surface, this looks like principled governance: international sport defending ethical standards and holding states accountable for their actions. However, this claim becomes less convincing when the same standards are not applied equally to all states.

During the 2024 Paris Olympics, Israel's military campaign in Gaza was brought to the International Court of Justice under allegations of genocide which had killed over 38,000 Palestinians, including at least 15,000 children¹¹. Despite the call for suspending Israel, IOC rejected it and allowed the Israeli athletes to take part in the event. Likewise, despite the calls from Amnesty International and UN experts to ban Israel, FIFA and UEFA didn't take any actions like they did with Russia. This shows a double standard. The decision to ban or not follows political and economic alignments. It is a structural feature of how sports are governed.

When sporting institutions apply different standards to different countries, they can no longer to be seen as neutral actors. They become part of the very political processes they claim to be above. Their selective enforcement mechanism shields certain actors from criticism, preserves their international legitimacy, and provides them with impunity. This contributes to a form of institutional sportswashing. In such cases, sports help shaping which political realities remain visible and which are pushed into the background.

Do the Mega Events Mask the Crisis?

Having discussed the politics of sports, the important question is: do mega-events mask crises? Mega-events neither cause geopolitical crises nor erase them. What they do is successfully shift global attention from the crisis towards the event. The media plays a major role in this process. Modern media operates within an attention economy. They broadcast programs where audience interest is a valuable commodity. Mega sporting events provide dramatic stories, emotional moments, star athletes, and continuous content that attract large audiences. As a result, news outlets often dedicate extensive airtime, front-page coverage, and social media attention to the tournament.

¹¹ "Paris 2024 Olympics: Key Issues – Israel, Russia, Seine, Hijab Ban, Workers," *Al Jazeera*, July 15, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/sports/2024/7/15/paris-2024-olympics-key-issues-israel-russia-seine-hijab-ban-workers>.

The role of the media is also political. A small number of large Western media organizations control global news flows. These organizations have strong financial resources and a wide global reach. Because of this, they have significant influence over how international events are reported and understood. The issues they choose to prioritize often influence what the world pays attention to and what it overlooks. Media outlets are not simply neutral observers; they operate within political, economic, and commercial environments that influence editorial decisions. During mega-events, extensive coverage of sporting spectacles can unintentionally or deliberately crowd out coverage of ongoing conflicts and humanitarian crises. In this way, media does not erase a crisis, but it can contribute to its temporary marginalization in global discourse.

During the 1936 Berlin Olympics, within just 16 days Germany portrayed itself as an open, modern, and welcoming country. The international spotlight focused on sporting achievements and grand ceremonies rather than the realities of the Nazi regime. In the 2018 Russia World Cup, the months before the tournament were dominated by headlines about Crimea, the Skripal poisoning, and Russia's role in Syria. Russia also faced partial diplomatic boycotts. Yet once the tournament began, it was widely viewed as a success. Media coverage pivoted almost entirely to football. Images of enthusiastic fans, packed stadiums, and cultural celebrations dominated news coverage. The crises did not disappear, but the attention shifted.

Now there is another World Cup. Once again, concerns loom over where global attention will shift and what the consequences of that shift may be. Israel continues its military operations in Gaza, and Lebanon, while tensions across the region remain high. The ongoing conflict involving the United States, Israel, and Iran hangs over the tournament, with one of its co-hosts directly involved in the crisis. In many ways, the answer is already visible. Before the tournament kicked off, debates over ICE raids, immigration enforcement, visa restrictions, and travel bans generated concerns and criticism for months. These issues dominated political discussions and news coverage. Yet as the World Cup started, much of that attention faded into the background. Headlines increasingly turned toward matches, players, and tournament narratives. These issues haven't been solved, they are just receiving less attention.

Conclusion

The beauty of sport lies in its ability to captivate people, provide moments of joy, and bring nations together in celebration. It is one of the very few occasions capable of bringing people together regardless of political, ideological, and social divides. There is a genuine beauty in that. Yet the purposes for which these events are used should be examined. The question is not whether these sporting events should exist, because undoubtedly they should. Rather, the challenge is to remain conscious of what they may conceal. Celebrating the game and embracing the sense of unity it creates should not overshadow the realities unfolding beyond the stadium. Holding sporting institutions and governing bodies accountable for the principles they claim to uphold is just as important as celebrating the event itself. Above all, the collective amnesia that such spectacles can sometimes produce should be resisted. Even when the world's attention is fixed on the stadium, it is important to remain attentive to what lies beyond it.