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The Ticket Was Never Enough: Access and Public Diplomacy ^[1]

Omar Artan spent eleven hours in a holding cell at Miami International Airport.

He had a valid visa. He had FIFA credentials. He had documentation, photographs, and a career's worth of evidence that he was exactly who he said he was: the best referee on the African continent, selected by FIFA as one of 52 officials for the 2026 World Cup. Border officials questioned him about Somali politics. They asked him about al-Shabaab. He showed them everything he had. Then they put him on a plane back to Istanbul.

"I think that they have a problem with my country," he told *The New York Times*.

He was right. Somalia is on the U.S. travel ban list. His credentials didn't change that. His appointment didn't change that. His eleven hours in a cell didn't change that. He flew home to Mogadishu, where thousands packed a stadium—not for a football match, but to welcome him back.

That stadium full of people is the essay. Everything else is context.

A dress code is never really about what it says it's about. It decides who belongs. It's enforced at the door, applied selectively, and rarely noticed by the people it doesn't affect. The World Cup's dress code isn't black tie. It's a passport.

The 2026 tournament didn't create that reality. It simply made it impossible to ignore.

Citizens of 39 countries faced full or partial U.S. travel restrictions. Of the 48 nations that qualified for the tournament, four had fans formally barred from attending U.S. matches. Others faced indefinite visa processing delays with no guarantee of resolution before kickoff. The State Department was clear: a World Cup ticket does not guarantee a visa.

Haiti's qualification offered a glimpse of what this looked like in practice. For the first time in more than half a century, Haitian supporters had a chance to watch their country compete on football's biggest stage. Many never got that opportunity. The barriers begin long before the stadium gates.

The broader pattern extends far beyond this tournament. Global mobility remains deeply unequal. Some passports provide access to much of the world, while others face growing barriers to international travel. The gap between the world's most and least powerful passports has widened dramatically over the past two decades, concentrating mobility among a relatively small number of countries while making international movement increasingly difficult for others.

Football didn't create those inequalities. But for years, the game's global reach made them easier to overlook.

Every country can play. Every country can qualify. Every flag can appear on the field. That universality made it easy to tell a story about inclusion without asking who could actually make it through the border.

The travel restrictions include exemptions for athletes and coaches. Not for most fans. Not for many journalists. Not for federation officials. And, in Omar Artan's case, not even for one of FIFA's own World Cup referees.

That distinction matters because it reveals what institutions value when inclusion collides with access.

Players are essential to the event. Fans are not.

FIFA had leverage. Expanding the World Cup to 48 teams was the largest act of inclusion in the tournament's history. The organization negotiated entry for players and team personnel. It did not secure comparable access for fans. It expanded participation on the field while leaving participation in the stands largely to national immigration systems.

That was a choice. A failure can be corrected. A choice tells you what something actually is. But the larger issue is not FIFA. It is the blind spot this episode reveals in public diplomacy.

Public diplomacy is often discussed in terms of image, influence, and perception. The field has long recognized the importance of exchanges, educational mobility, and people-to-people engagement. None of that is new. What the World Cup highlights is a familiar challenge at an unusually visible scale. The question is not whether mobility matters. It is how mobility constraints shape who can participate in the very encounters public diplomacy seeks to encourage.

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At its core, public diplomacy rests on a simple belief: that direct human contact matters.

Bring people into a country. Let them experience its cities, institutions, culture, and daily life. Let them meet people they would never otherwise meet. Something changes. Not always dramatically. Not always immediately. But enough to justify decades of investment in exchanges, cultural programs, educational partnerships, and international events.

The World Cup is one of the largest expressions of that idea ever created. What 2026 reveals is that the mechanism has a filter—and it removes many of the very people public diplomacy hopes to reach.

The people public diplomacy most hopes to reach are often those from countries where relationships are most fragile or contested. Yet those are frequently the same countries whose citizens face the greatest barriers to mobility. The people most likely to gain a more nuanced understanding of the United States are often the people least able to enter it.

The opportunity for engagement disappears before it begins.

The reputational consequences are measurable. The relational consequences are harder to quantify—and potentially more important.

Tens of thousands of people who might have returned home with stories about American cities, communities, and everyday encounters never had those experiences. Instead, many encountered the United States only through the visa process itself.

That story travels too. It is shared among families, communities, and social networks. It becomes part of how countries understand one another—not through official messaging, but through lived experience. Public diplomacy ultimately operates through those human stories. They carry farther than press releases and last longer than campaigns.

For decades, public diplomacy has largely treated access as a logistical question. Secure the venue. Build the program. Extend the invitation. The assumption has been that if the opportunity exists, people will come.

What the 2026 World Cup exposes is that participation is increasingly determined much earlier, by a global mobility system that decides who can move and who cannot.

The tournament did not create that system. It made it visible.

The 2030 World Cup will be hosted by Morocco, Portugal, and Spain. The 2034 tournament will be held in Saudi Arabia. The politics will be different. The controversies will be different. The underlying question will remain the same.

Who gets to be present when the world gathers?

Public diplomacy has spent decades focused on what happens after people arrive. The lesson of 2026 may be that it also needs to pay more attention to what determines whether people can arrive at all.

Omar Artan learned that lesson in an airport holding cell. The thousands who welcomed him home already knew it.
