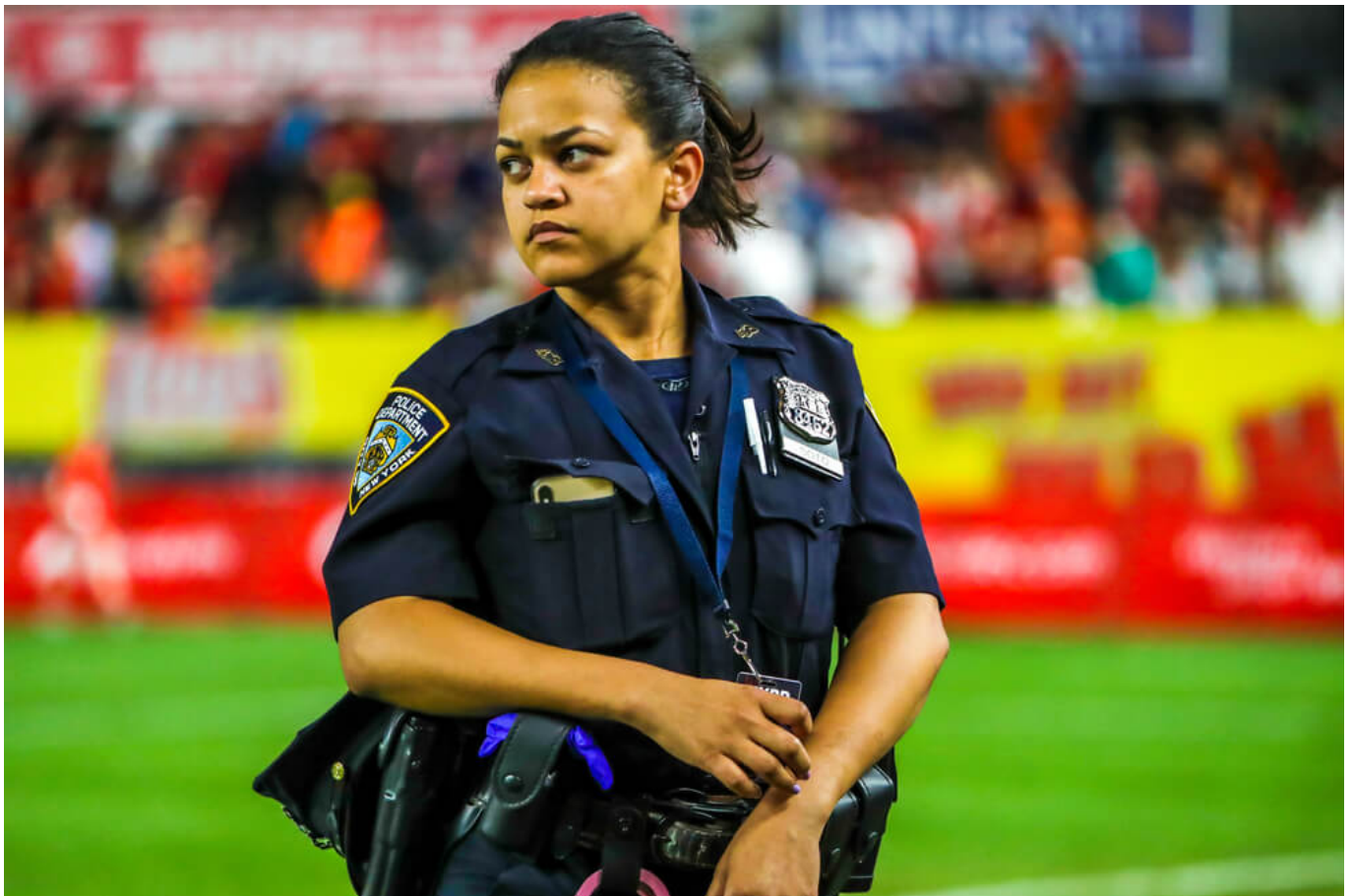




By: TA | AP Insight

Is the US ready for the World Cup's unprecedented security challenge?



The World Cup, a 48-team, 104-match behemoth kicking off next week across 16 cities in the United States, Mexico and Canada, presents an unprecedented security challenge, with **more countries**, games and a larger footprint than ever before.

It also comes against the backdrop of the U.S. and Israel's **war with Iran**, mounting political violence in President Donald **Trump's orbit** and growing fears of artificial intelligence-fueled disruptions, creating a complex **threat environment** for authorities.

Overseeing the sprawling security apparatus is a legion of federal agencies, state and local police departments and private entities.

Their responsibilities range from securing stadiums and fan zones to escorting teams and protecting dignitaries.

Their tools include hunter drones that can shoot nets over objects in restricted airspace, bag-inspecting robot dogs, giant X-ray trucks and thousands of AI-powered cameras trained on public spaces soon to be thronged by fans.

In the U.S., it's "78 Super Bowls over 39 days," said Andrew Giuliani, executive director of Trump's World Cup task force, which is overseeing the multiagency effort.

"There's never been a summer like this in American history from a security angle," said Giuliani, son of former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani.

"We're as prepared as we can be."

An unprecedented security collaboration

The tournament has the same high-level federal security designation as the Super Bowl, just below a presidential inauguration or a national political convention, ensuring federal, state and local coordination. It coincides with other major events linked to the 250th anniversary of America's founding.

So far, Giuliani said, there are no credible threats.

The Department of Homeland Security, focused on Trump's immigration enforcement crackdown and hit by a funding lapse only recently resolved, estimates up to 7 million people will visit the U.S. for the World Cup.

The U.S. Secret Service, under scrutiny after security breaches and attempts on Trump's life, is in charge of protecting world leaders who show up to cheer on their countries. Trump has expressed interest in attending a match.

"I feel very comfortable where we're at, and we feel like we have a zero-fail mission," Homeland Security Secretary Markwayne Mullin told Congress this week, noting that the Secret Service was understaffed by about 860 agents. "But it's going to be complicated."

Officials have indicated they are confident they can keep Trump safe because they will be integrating his usual security into the robust World Cup plan on days he may watch a match.

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The FBI has spent two years developing its security plan, incorporating lessons from other major events such as the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and New Year's Eve ball drop in New York and testing them at smaller ones, including last week's Israel Day parade in the city.

"We prepare for the worst day," FBI Special Agent in Charge Amit Kachhia-Patel in New York told The Associated Press. "And that's how we go into any single event."

To help cover security costs, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has distributed \$625 million to the 11 U.S. host cities. An additional \$250 million is being directed toward tracking and neutralizing suspect drones.

The disbursement of those funds was held up by the department's funding delay, which the Republican administration has argued hindered security planning.

Others involved in the planning effort said the federal government could have played a more hands-on role even before the shutdown.

John Cohen, a former senior DHS official who has been briefing state leaders before the matches, said the government was largely absent from planning meetings last year and did not begin sharing threat intelligence with host regions until recently.

“With an event of this magnitude, one would expect the federal government would’ve played a more active role,” Cohen said. “It felt like a missed opportunity to showcase that collaboration.”

Evolving threats from drones and AI

In January, thousands of officials involved in World Cup security gathered for exercises simulating crowd surges, vehicle attacks and mass shootings.

A month later, the U.S. and Israel launched a war with Iran.

“The security picture fundamentally changed,” said Stefano Ritondale, chief intelligence officer at Artorias, a defense intelligence company not involved in the security preparations. “There’s a major difference in preparing for a lone wolf radical who rams his car into a public place and a terrorist who is bankrolled by a foreign country we’re at war with.”

Among the greatest concerns are drones.

Since the last World Cup in Qatar in 2022, drones have become a prominent weapon in conflicts including Russia’s [war in Ukraine](#) and Hamas’ attack on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023.

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“If there is one threat that keeps me up at night, it is from drones,” said New York City Police Commissioner Jessica Tisch, whose department is partnering with the FBI on drone mitigation.

Drones are prohibited over stadiums and fan zones, and Kachhia-Patel said the FBI has a “full suite of options” to thwart incursions. They include agents monitoring the sky and a “variety of means” to safely down the devices, he said without elaborating.

Before this year’s World Cup, the growing sophistication of AI videos was a particular concern, with officials warning that state actors can harness the technology to sow misinformation and panic.

On match days, the FBI will activate joint operations centers in each host city, bringing together local, state and federal law enforcement agencies to monitor and investigate threats.

“If there’s a video that shows an explosion going off at a site, and it’s AI generated, we have people on the ground who can validate whether or not that’s true,” said Kachhia-Patel.

A scoring opportunity for private tech

Some AI companies have pitched themselves to police departments in host cities, promising to comb through data and surveillance on game days to prevent threats, including unruly fan behavior.

“We know sports fanaticism around here in terms of the NFL and baseball to some extent, but nothing like international soccer,” said Jake Becchina, a police spokesperson in Kansas City, Missouri, which is hosting six matches.



If we do our job right, nobody will be talking about security at the World Cup - Andrew Giuliani

The department has contracted with Peregrine Technologies, which promises to sift through police data and publicly available information such as team practice locations and the country affiliation of popular bars, to get ahead of possible conflict.

In Dallas, a recent \$120 million tech upgrade will give local police body cameras capable of real-time translations, helping law enforcement communicate with international visitors soon to descend on the region.

Several drone detection and mitigation companies are joining efforts to help federal agencies secure the skies.

One of those companies, Fortem, has claimed to have signed a multimillion-dollar contract with DHS before the World Cup for an unusual drone mitigation strategy: quadcopters that can shoot nets at encroaching drones to trap them in midair. A spokesperson for DHS declined to discuss the contract.

Just as the teams will aim to perform their best on the pitch, Giuliani said the security planning was a unique chance to “show off American exceptionalism.”

“If we do our job right,” Giuliani added, “nobody will be talking about security at the World Cup.”