

# Tonali saves Italy from World Cup **disaster** against Israel

Italy trail leaders Norway by three points and still have a chance of taking first place



Italy's players celebrate their goal against Israel during the 2026 World Cup qualifiers Europe zone group I football match between Israel and I

AFP | Debrecen, Hungary

Sandro Tonali earned Italy a thrilling 5-4 win against Israel on Monday with the decisive late strike in the 2026 World Cup qualifier just as it looked like the Azzurri were plunging into another crisis. Newcastle United midfielder Tonali wheeled off in celebration in stoppage time when his speculative effort went through a sea of legs and into the net to win a rollercoaster of a match in Debrecen, Hungary, which Italy looked to have thrown away. The Azzurri, who have missed the last two World Cups, were leading 4-2 in the 81st minute when substitute Giacomo Raspadori rolled home almost immediately after replacing the impressive Moise Kean, who netted Italy's first two goals. However, a clumsy Alessandro Bastoni own-goal and Dor Peretz's header drew Israel level before Tonali's fortunate effort moved Italy up to second in Group I -- level on nine points with Israel who have played a

game more -- and in the play-off spot. "We'll take the win which was crucial for us, but we're completely nuts, nuts because we conceded some absurd goals," said Gennaro Gattuso. "We need to work on that because we're too fragile, we concede goals too easily. The boys know that, but this is my problem to fix. "You have to give credit to the boys because every time they took a slap they had the courage to react and fight back." Italy trail leaders Norway by three points and still have a chance of taking first place and the group's sole direct qualifying spot. But new coach Gattuso has a lot to think about ahead of October's return fixtures with Estonia and Israel, whose players donned black armbands in honour of the victims of Monday morning's deadly shooting at a bus stop in east Jerusalem carried out Palestinian gunmen. Nominal home team Israel would have been good value

for the draw, as Kean had previously twice pulled Italy out of the mire following Manuel Locatelli's early own-goal and a fabulous Dor Peretz strike in the 52nd minute in a largely empty Nagyerdei Stadium. **Italy rocked** Monday's match had cast a political cloud over Gattuso's first fixtures in charge of Italy due to Israel's offensive in the Gaza Strip. The small group of Italian fans present turned their backs to the pitch during the Israeli national anthem, while boos also rang out from sections of the stadium, before then holding up banners which read "stop". And the Italians on the pitch looked equally uninterested in the match come kick-off, with Israel snapper and more aggressive than the four-time world champions. The nominal home had already had a goal disallowed by the time Locatelli bundled Dan Biton's cross into his own net. Locatelli almost made up for



Italy's forward #10 Giacomo Raspadori (3rd R) celebrates with team mates after scoring the 2-4 goal during the 2026 World Cup qualifiers Europe zone group I football match between Israel and Italy

his own-goal when he struck the bar with an acrobatic volley in the 31st minute, seconds before Kean wasted a great opportunity from a Gianluca Mancini cut-back. But 10 minutes later Kean thumped a low drive past Daniel Peretz after collecting a knockdown from strike partner Mateo Retegui. And Kean came to the rescue again nine minutes after the break, levelling with another powerful low shot just seconds after Peretz put Israel ahead for the second time with a brilliant first-time effort. Politano finally put Italy ahead with a great volley after more fine work from Retegui, and when Raspadori rolled home the fourth it seemed the away team looked out of the woods. But it took Tonali's unusual winner to finally secure the three points after un-



Israel's defender #05 Idan Nachmias (R) and Italy's forward #20 Daniel Maldini vie for the ball

characteristically bad defending nearly left Italy's hopes of qualification hanging by a thread.

## Captains vow controlled aggression in **India-Pakistan showdown**

Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Rival captains Salman Agha and Suryakumar Yadav vowed to keep controlled aggression when Pakistan and India clash in the Asia Cup in Dubai on Sunday, the countries' first match since their conflict in May. The encounter in the eight-team Twenty20 international tournament comes after India and Pakistan exchanged deadly cross-border military action

earlier this year. The two countries stepped back from all-out war but bitterness remains on both sides. The neighbours only play each other in cricket in international tournaments on neutral ground as part of a compromise deal. Agha said his Pakistan team will channel any aggression in the right way. "If someone wants to be aggressive on the field, they are more than welcome to do that,"

Agha said in Dubai on Tuesday. "You can't stop fast bowlers because that's what keeps them going. So whoever wants to be aggressive, they are more than welcome. India and Pakistan last met in cricket, again in Dubai, in February in the 50-over Champions Trophy, with India winning and going on to lift the title. Skipper Suryakumar agreed with his Pakistan counterpart. "Aggression is always there on the field and without aggression

you cannot play the game," he said. India are eight-time Asia Cup champions and the reigning holders. They and Pakistan, champions twice, are placed in Group A alongside hosts United Arab Emirates and Oman. Afghanistan kick off the competition in a Group B clash against Hong Kong in Abu Dhabi on Tuesday. The other teams in that group are six-time champions Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.



on Friday, both in Dubai.

India open their campaign against the UAE on Wednesday while Pakistan play Oman