



Escalation within Continuity

Spain's Foreign Policy towards Israel and Palestine after October 7th

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► Key Takeaways

- The novelty of Spain's stance since October 7th, lies not in its core principles, but in the tone, visibility, and policy translation of these commitments.
- What distinguishes the current phase is that rhetorical escalation has been accompanied by concrete political and legal measures, including sanctions against Israel.
- While Spain has positioned itself at the forefront of international pressure on Israel, its capacity to shape European policy remains limited by structural constraints within the European Union.
- A favorable political configuration, sustained civil society mobilization, and permissive public opinion have reduced the political costs of adopting a more assertive stance.
- Growing political polarization suggests that Spain's Middle East policy may become increasingly partisan, raising questions about the future of its traditional cross-party consensus.

Introduction

Over the past two years, Spain has emerged as one of the most vocal countries in supporting the Palestinian cause. While Madrid initially aligned with the prevailing European position, recognizing Israel's right to self-defense after the 7 October attacks, it soon distinguished itself from most European Union (EU) Member States by questioning and later condemning Israel's conduct of war in Gaza.

As the diplomatic crisis between Madrid and Tel Aviv deepened, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez hardened his rhetoric, openly calling Israel a "genocidal state". This rhetorical escalation was translated into concrete measures operating along two parallel tracks: increased pressure on Israel and stronger support for the Palestinians. On the one hand, Spain joined the case brought by South Africa before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), accusing Israel of genocide. On the other hand, it increased aid to Gaza and the Palestinian Authority (PA) and recognized the State of Palestine. These developments culminated with the adoption of several measures against Israel in September 2025, bringing Spain-Israel relations to their lowest point in decades.

The interplay between these dynamics has reignited debate about the determinants of Spain's policy *vis-à-vis* the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Some observers contend that Spain's stance is consistent with its long-standing sympathy for the Palestinian cause and historically strained relations with Israel. Others point to contextual drivers, including Sánchez's left-leaning government, a highly sensitized public opinion, a mobilized civil society, and growing polarization.

This paper argues that, while apparently surprising, Spain's assertive stance is consistent with its long-standing approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. What is relatively new, however, is the intensity of Spain's criticism of Israel and the willingness to translate its commitments into concrete political and legal measures.

The Arab world as a structural driver of Spain's Israel-Palestine policy

Historically, Spain's approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been characterized by sustained support for Palestinian rights alongside recurrent frictions with Israel. During the Franco era, this posture was closely tied to Spain's international isolation in the aftermath of the Second World War. To compensate for its marginalization in Europe, the regime pursued what it termed "substitution policies" (*políticas de sustitución*), seeking to diversify diplomatic relations with Latin American and Arab

countries.¹ In this context, Franco deepened ties with Arab states with two main objectives: to secure diplomatic backing for Spain's admission to the United Nations (UN) and to advance broader economic and strategic interests. This so-called "traditional Spanish–Arab friendship" was less an expression of historical affinity than a relationship of mutual benefit: Spain presented itself as a bridge between Arab and Latin American leaders, endorsed the principle of non-interference they championed, and aligned with them on the Palestinian question. In return, it gained privileged access to natural resources as well as diplomatic support on sensitive issues such as Gibraltar, Western Sahara, and Ceuta and Melilla. Thus, maintaining distance from Israel was not merely ideological; rather, it was perceived as a necessary condition for preserving broader geopolitical and economic interests.²

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Spanish diplomats consistently rejected Israeli overtures. Beyond early diplomatic frictions, Madrid feared that formal recognition would undermine its relations with Arab states.³ Indeed, as Spain gradually reintegrated into the international community during the 1950s—particularly through the improvement of US–Spanish relations within the broader Cold War effort to contain communism—, recognizing Israel appeared as potentially costly. During this period, Spain's relationship with Israel was therefore not purely bilateral but trilateral, i.e., conditioned by Madrid's relations with the Arab world.⁴

This approach initially survived Franco's death in 1975. During the democratic transition, several governments remained cautious about recognizing Israel, due to concerns about possible Arab retaliation and domestic political sensitivities.⁵ The opening of a Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) office in Madrid (1977) and the symbolic reception of Yasser Arafat by Prime Minister Adolfo Suárez (1979) illustrated the persistence of this pro-Palestinian orientation.

However, by the early 1980s, Spain's continued absence of diplomatic relations with Israel increasingly appeared anomalous for a country seeking full integration into Western political and security structures. Accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1982 and negotiations to join the European Economic Community (EEC) intensified pressure on Madrid to normalize relations. Against this backdrop, the establishment of

1. J. L. N. Hernández, "Políticas de sustitución, tecnocracia e imaginarios periféricos en la España de Franco", in: *El Poder de la Historia: Huella y legado de Javier M^a Donézar Díez de Ulzurrun*, Madrid: Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 2014, pp. 231–252.

2. F. Portero, "Las relaciones hispano-israelíes", *Araucaria: Revista Iberoamericana de Filosofía, Política, Humanidades y Relaciones Internacionales*, Vol. 10, No. 19, 2008, pp. 179–196.

3. In 1949, Israel opposed lifting Spain's diplomatic boycott at the United Nations, citing alleged Francoist collaboration with Nazi Germany. This episode left a lasting imprint on bilateral relations. More broadly, relations between Spain and Israel have been shaped by a longer historical memory rooted in the 1492 expulsion of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula. The absence of official recognition of this historical legacy for much of the 20th century further contributed to mutual distance and mistrust. See: S. Hadas, "España e Israel: quinientos años después", *Política Exterior*, No. 30, 1992, pp. 191–206.

4. F. Portero, "Las relaciones hispano-israelíes", op. cit., p. 180.

5. R. Rein, *Franco, Israel y los judíos*, Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1996.

diplomatic ties with Israel in January 1986—the same month that Spain became a full member of the EEC—should be understood as an adjustment driven by Europeanization.

Normalization and the emergence of bipartisan continuity

Rather than weakening Spain's support for Palestinian self-determination, normalization with Israel allowed Madrid to present itself as a mediator, which helped contain potential backlash from Arab partners.⁶ Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, Madrid sought to act as a mediator through several bilateral and European diplomatic initiatives. During the first Spanish presidency of the ECC, the Madrid Declaration (1989) restated the Palestinian right to self-determination, as already articulated in the Venice Declaration (1980), and called for an international peace conference involving all parties, including the PLO, which Madrid eventually hosted in 1991. While Spain's role in this conference should not be overstated, it nonetheless consolidated its image as a constructive diplomatic actor.⁷ This mediating posture was also reflected in high-level symbolic gestures, including state visits between Spain and

Israel in the early 1990s and the Prince of Asturias Award for International Cooperation, awarded by King Juan Carlos I to the President of the PA, Yasser Arafat, and the Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, in 1994.

Normalization with Israel allowed Madrid to present itself as a mediator

Since the mid-1990s, Spain's policy has followed a broadly stable pattern, punctuated by episodic inflections linked to changes in government and recurrent wars in the

Middle East.⁸ A first major inflection occurred during José María Aznar's presidency (1996–2004), when Spain adopted a more pro-Israeli stance, particularly in his second term. This shift was driven by Spain's strengthening transatlantic alignment after the 9/11 attacks. Developments such as the “Global War on Terror”, the collapse of the Oslo process and the Second Intifada reinforced a security-focused narrative aligned with Israel's framing, portraying the Palestinian leadership as corrupt, ineffective, and complicit in violence.⁹ Moreover, in line with Washington's stance and in contradiction with the EU position, Madrid conditioned the resumption of the peace process on counterterrorism and reform of the PA.

6. E. Miralpeix, “Factores que condicionan las relaciones hispano-israelíes”, in: R. Rein (ed.), *España e Israel. Veinte años después*, Madrid: Dykinson, 2007, pp. 27–36.

7. Although held in Madrid, the conference followed a U.S.-led framework that diverged from the European positions as articulated in the Venice (1980) and Madrid Declarations. The European Community was largely sidelined and confined to an economic role.

8. I. Álvarez-Ossorio Alvariano, “España, Israel y Palestina: encuentros y desencuentros”, *Hispania*, Vol. 79, No. 261, 2019, pp. 221–248.

9. A. M. C. Hernández, “El conflicto palestino-israelí visto desde España: oscilaciones y tendencias de la opinión pública”, *Ámbitos. Revista Internacional de Comunicación*, No. 20, 2011, pp. 149–174.

Subsequent governments acted in continuity. The Socialist governments of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (2004-2011) placed greater emphasis on human rights and international law, firmly condemning Israel's disproportionate use of force during the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war and its military campaigns in Gaza (2006-2009). However, this hardening of tone did not translate into a radical shift. Instead, engagement with Israel continued, with Madrid assuming an "increasingly accommodating stance towards Tel Aviv".¹⁰ For instance, the Spanish executive introduced a reform to the universal jurisdiction law that significantly limited the possibility of pursuing cases against Israeli officials—a move publicly welcomed by Israeli President Shimon Peres.¹¹

Under Mariano Rajoy's presidency (2011–2017), Spain reaffirmed its commitment to the two-state solution through several diplomatic initiatives: it supported Palestine's admission as a full member of UNESCO in 2011, backed its bid for non-member observer State status at the UN in 2012, and adopted a parliamentary resolution calling on the government to recognize a Palestinian State in 2014. The fact that these measures were adopted under a center-right government underscores the cross-party nature of Spain's position on Palestine.

Escalation within continuity: Spain's foreign policy after October 7th

Upon taking office in 2018, Sánchez largely maintained Spain's bipartisan Middle East policy, characterized by support for the two-state solution, recognition of Israel's right to security, and defense of Palestinian statehood and rights. The 7 October attacks did not mark a reversal of Spain's position but rather triggered a shift in tone and diplomatic activism that made Spain's long-standing commitments more politically salient.

The shift was one of tone, not of doctrine

In the immediate aftermath of the Hamas-led attacks, Madrid aligned with the prevailing European position: it condemned the attacks, called for the immediate release of hostages, and reaffirmed Israel's right to self-defense. However, as the Israeli military campaign in Gaza intensified and civilian casualties mounted, Madrid emerged as one of the first European capitals to openly question Israel's compliance with international humanitarian law and to call for an immediate ceasefire.¹² Sánchez's statements prompted a sharp reaction from Tel Aviv, which accused Madrid of siding with Hamas and summoned Spain's ambassador—an episode that escalated into a diplomatic crisis between the two countries.

10. I. Álvarez-Ossorio Alvariño, "España, Israel y Palestina: encuentros y desencuentros", op. cit., pp. 240–241.

11. M. Cruz, "Peres valora que España no juzgue a 'israelíes que defienden a su pueblo'", *El Mundo*, October 15, 2009, available at: www.elmundo.es.

12. "Sánchez Conveys to Netanyahu Spain's Condemnation of Hamas Attacks and the Need to Protect the Civilian Population in Gaza", *La Moncloa*, November 23, 2023, available at: www.lamoncloa.gob.es.

This escalation was not merely declaratory. In 2024 and 2025, Spanish diplomacy has become more and more vocal, criticizing Israel's violations of international law while leveraging European and multilateral frameworks to amplify pressure on Israel. In February 2024, together with then Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, Sánchez asked the European Commission (EC) to undertake a review of the EU–Israel Association Agreement (AA) based on Article 2, which conditions the agreement on respect for human rights. Although the initiative failed to secure sufficient support within the Council, it ultimately led the EC to announce a related review process.¹³ However, while Spain gained diplomatic visibility through this positioning, its ability to translate it into binding European decisions remained constrained by the requirement of unanimity and by its limited coalition-building leverage within the Council.¹⁴

Spanish diplomacy subsequently sought to act beyond the European arena through alternative avenues to exert diplomatic pressure. In June 2024, Madrid became the first European country to join South Africa's ICJ case accusing Israel of genocide, making it one of the few Western capitals to openly endorse international judicial scrutiny of Israel's conduct. In parallel, Spain formalized its support for Palestinian statehood by recognizing the State of Palestine in May 2024, in coordination with Ireland and Norway. While this decision echoed the 2014 parliamentary resolution, its framing and timing made it particularly significant. Presented as a concrete step to advance the two-state solution amid the war in Gaza and calls by Israeli leaders for the annexation of Palestinian territories, this move was welcomed both domestically and across the Global South.¹⁵

Building on this political capital, Spain also leveraged its ties with Arab and Muslim majority countries to internationalize its position. In November 2024, the Euro-Arab Islamic Group adopted the Madrid Declaration, calling for an immediate ceasefire and the implementation of the two-state solution.¹⁶ In May 2025, during the second meeting of the Group, Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, EU and Cooperation José Manuel Albares went further, calling for an arms embargo on Israel, the suspension of the EU–Israel AA, and sanctions to halt Israel's operations in Gaza. That same month, Sánchez attended the Arab League summit in Baghdad as a special guest, urging Arab support for a Spanish-backed UN resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza.

Finally, Spain increased its humanitarian and financial assistance to the Palestinians. From October 2023 onwards, it mobilized aid for Gaza and the West Bank,

13. M. Bourekba, "EU-Israel Agreement Review: Saving Face without Changing Position", *CIDOB Opinión*, No. 836, CIDOB – Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, 2025, available at: www.cidob.org.

14. Interview with Former EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, February 17, 2026.

15. M. González, "España recibirá el respaldo de los países árabes e islámicos un día después de reconocer al Estado palestino", *El País*, May 28, 2024, available at: www.elpais.com.

16. The so-called Euro-Arab Islamic Group brings together representatives from several Arab countries, the League of Arab States, the Islamic Cooperation Organization, and from Ireland, Norway, Slovenia and Spain. See: "Resumen del año 2024: una política exterior con identidad propia", Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación, 2024, available at: www.exteriores.gob.es.

with total allocations exceeding €75 million by 2025, and increased its support to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.¹⁷ The Spanish executive also provided €50 million to the PA in 2025 to address acute fiscal strain generated by Israel's withholding of Palestinian tax revenues. As in other areas of its policy, Madrid framed this assistance not merely as solidarity, but as an obligation derived from international law.

All in all, these initiatives positioned Spain at the forefront of efforts to increase international pressure on Israel, particularly at a time when parts of the Global South criticized Europe's inaction over Gaza.¹⁸ However, this perception of leadership must be understood in relative terms. In the absence of EU consensus and given the reluctance of larger Member States to incur the political costs of concrete measures, Spain's differentiation appeared more visible than its actual capacity to structurally reshape European policy.¹⁹

Despite these constraints, Madrid continued to expand the range of instruments at its disposal. This trajectory culminated in September 2025, when the Spanish government adopted a package of measures combining coercive measures against Israel—including an arms embargo—, with reinforced political and humanitarian support for the Palestinians. The fact that these measures were adopted in a context of mounting diplomatic pressure—with discussions over a potential suspension of the EU–Israel AA, a wave of new recognitions of Palestine at the UN, and growing support for claims that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza—provided momentum for Spain's diplomatic activism.

Explaining the timing: the domestic and political determinants of Spain's post-October 7th foreign policy

The key question, then, is not whether Spain altered its policy, but why it decided to translate its longstanding commitments into concrete measures at this particular juncture. The explanation lies in the interplay between a favorable domestic political configuration, sustained civil society mobilization, and public opinion trends that reduced the political costs of assertive action.

The first explanation relates to the domestic political configuration. The Sánchez government, formed by the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) and the left-wing party Sumar, defines itself as progressive and places human rights and international law

17. "España destina 20 millones a ayuda humanitaria a Gaza en lo que va de 2025 y supera los 76 millones desde 2023", Europa Press, August 7, 2025, available at: www.europapress.es.

18. S. Islam, "Europe and the Global South: How to Gain Influence and Credibility in A Complex World", ARI 50/2024, Elcano Royal Institute, April 25, 2024, available at: <https://media.realinstitutoelcano.org>.

19. Interview with Former EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, February 17, 2026.

at the center of its political identity. In this context, the scale of destruction in Gaza heightened public sensitivity and increased pressure from Sumar and other left-wing forces, thereby narrowing the executive's room for ambiguity and pushing it to adopt new measures.²⁰

Another explanation lies in societal dynamics. On the one hand, pro-Palestinian activism, deeply rooted in Spain,²¹ became highly visible after the October 7 attacks. Weekly demonstrations were organized across the country and coordinated campaigns—such as the mobilization around the *La Vuelta a España* cycle race and the *End the arms trade with Israel* campaign—²² contributed to raising public awareness and increasing pressure on the Spanish executive. The mobilization surrounding *La Vuelta* was publicly supported by the Spanish PM, while the September 2025 arms embargo can be seen as resulting from sustained pressure from the latter campaign, backed by 632 civil society organizations.²³ On the other hand, public opinion provided permissive conditions for government action: survey data from early 2024 indicate broad public support for the recognition of a Palestinian state (78%), while responsibility for the situation in Gaza was increasingly attributed to Israel.²⁴ These trends, consistent with enduring pro-

Palestinian sentiment in Spain,²⁵ lowered the electoral costs of measures such as recognizing Palestine or criticizing Israel.

It is worth noting that this activism also fueled political polarization along pre-existing ideological cleavages. While far-right actors such as Vox openly embraced the Israeli government's security framing, the Partido Popular adopted a more cautious but largely security-oriented stance, criticizing the

government's confrontational approach and opposing unilateral measures against Israel. In contrast, parties on the left pressed for stronger legal and economic pressure on Israel, turning the issue into a marker of political differentiation. Indeed, the prominent role assumed by the Prime Minister in key foreign policy announcements underscores the extent to which this conflict had become politically salient. As the war in Gaza moved to the center of media and parliamentary debate, and coincided with corruption scandals affecting the PSOE,²⁶ opposition parties accused the government of instrumentalizing the Palestinian question to divert attention.

The Gaza war has become a marker of political differentiation

20. Interview with a civil society leader, December 19, 2025.

21. I. Barreñada Bajo (coord.), J. Abu-Tarbush Quevedo, I. Álvarez-Ossorio Alvariño, and J. A. Sanahuja Perales, *Entre España y Palestina: Revisión crítica de unas relaciones*, Barcelona: Bellaterra, 2018.

22. Official website of the campaign: www.finalcomerciodearmasconisrael.org.

23. Interviews with representatives from Spanish civil society organizations, December 19, 2025 and February 2, 2026.

24. C. González Enríquez and J. Pablo Martínez, "Spanish Public Opinion Regarding the Recognition of the State of Palestine", Experts Comment, Elcano Royal Institute, May 22, 2024, available at: www.realinstitutoelcano.org.

25. A. M. C. Hernández, "El conflicto palestino-israelí visto desde España: oscilaciones y tendencias de la opinión pública", op. cit., p. 160.

26. E. Sánchez Nicolás, "PM Sánchez Cornered: What's Happening in Spain?", *EUobserver*, June 20, 2025, available at: www.euobserver.com.

To conclude, the core principles underpinning Madrid's approach—support for a two-state solution, defense of international law and support for Palestinian self-determination—have remained broadly stable across decades and through changes of government. What has evolved since October 7th is the tone, the degree of visibility and policy translation of these commitments. Beyond structural factors, and without reducing foreign policy to tactical calculation, it is clear that Spain's activism on Palestine has been facilitated by a political environment in which costs were limited and reputational benefits tangible. This suggests that Spain's approach may become increasingly partisan rather than anchored in a cross-party consensus. If this is the case, the sustainability of this policy will depend on the future trajectory of political polarization.

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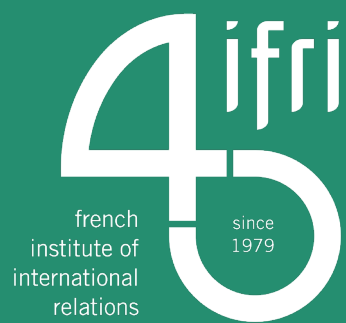
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Cover: Logroño, La Rioja, Spain – September 6, 2024: Palestinian flags at the Vuelta a España, in which a team bearing the logo of the genocidal Israeli regime is participating as a guest

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