



POLICY BRIEF

Evaluating Spanish Foreign Policy Towards the Post-October 2023 Israel-Palestine War: Between Liberalism and Constructivism

Mahmoud Mohamed Hassan Hassan

Research Intern, Jindal Centre for the Global South
O.P. Jindal Global University, India



Introduction:

On 28 May 2024, Spain, Ireland, and Norway announced their recognition of Palestine. The move represented a precedent for the European Union (EU), as apart from Sweden in 2014, no state has recognized Palestine after gaining membership in the bloc (Kausch, 2024; Sharp, 2024). Consequently, Spain's unilateral recognition represents a departure from EU institutions that have had a history of favoring coordinated and collective action (Kausch, 2024).

Therefore, Spain's approach is highly controversial within the EU. For example, Spanish state officials declared their solidarity with Palestine 107 times from October 7, 2023 to March 2024 (Fürst, 2024, p. 25). In addition, in November 2023, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell stated, "Spain is a country with a clear sympathy for the Arab world" (O'Donoghue, 2023). Accordingly, there is a need to examine the underlying causes behind Spain's foreign policy towards the conflict.

Thus, this paper analyzes the extent to which liberal, and constructivist international relations theories can explain Spanish foreign policy towards the Post- October 2023 Israeli-Palestine conflict. It argues that constructivism provides a superior explanation of the Spanish foreign policy towards the 2023-2024 Israel-Palestine war rather than its liberal theoretical counterpart. The constructivist framework highlights the historical constructions, identity-based motivations and the social contexts behind Spain's staunch support for the Palestinian cause. Despite the capability of liberalism to shed light on Spain's use of international organizations and multilateral diplomacy to express its pro-Palestinian position, the theory falls short in explaining the motives behind Spain's stance.

Therefore, the scholarly aim is to analyze the Spanish foreign policy towards the conflict from both liberal and constructivist lenses. The paper relies on discourse analysis and other

secondary sources to identify common patterns in Spain's behavior. Finally, the paper is divided into five sections. The first section reviews multiple scholarly arguments. The second section introduces constructivist and liberal analyses of foreign policy. The third section investigates Spain's approach consistent with liberal values. The fourth section investigates the historical constructions of Spanish position towards the conflict. The final section examines the impact of anti-oppression norm on Madrid's foreign policy.

Literature Review

International Organizations Approach

By examining existing literature, two main approaches can be detected in literature. First, there is an emphasis on Spanish interactions with international organizations. For example, Fürst (2024, p.26) highlighted the Spanish call for urgent action to the European Parliament and European Commission during the Cairo Peace Summit in October 2023. Daku and Rudaku (2024, p.9) argued that Spain's recognition reflects Madrid's commitment to Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 that establish the "land for peace" formula.

Ultimately, Dodman (2024) claimed that Spain supports internationally approved decisions regardless of the government's ideological orientation. He cited Spain's vote in favor of Palestine's membership in the United Nations General Assembly in 2012 under a right-wing government led by the Popular Party. This approach lacks an explanation for the reasons behind Spain's consistent support for Palestine.

Domestic Factors Approach

Second, the role of domestic factors can explain Spain's foreign policy towards the Palestinians. For instance, the Spanish education system, which promotes principles of social justice, human

rights, and peaceful conflict resolution, has contributed to the creation of a pro-Palestinian society (Buheji & Hasan, 2024, p.11). O'Donoghue (2023) adopted a more historical analysis, noting that in 1993, Spain played a pivotal role in the Oslo Accords and contributed to the mutual recognition between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). These ideas lack a deep understanding of the evolution of the Spanish position towards the conflict.

Therefore, this study attempts to bridge the gap and provide a concrete explanation of how constructivist factors such as historical constructions and identity-based societal support produce a pro-Palestinian stance in Spain. This means that liberalism does not address the underlying causes of Spanish sympathy for the Palestinians.

Theoretical Framework

Since liberalism stands for human rights and peace, especially in driving foreign policy, states that champion liberal values tend to have hold opposition against human rights violations (Doyle, 2016, PP.56-69). Accordingly, liberal states should not tolerate genocide and crimes against humanity. Therefore, liberal states should pursue active human rights diplomacy. (Doyle, 2016, pp.69-74).

International institutions are utilized by individual states to resolve disputes peacefully. (Doyle, 2016, p.66). Therefore, in consonance with the public opinions, liberal societies push their governments to pursue policies that align with international law. (Doyle, 2016, p.69).

Secondly, constructivism argues that social processes shape reality (Flockhart, 2016, p.84). Thus, shared meanings are constructed leading to a shared understanding of the appropriate actions (Flockhart, 2016, p.91). Constructivists also believe in the power of ideas and norms that evolve from historical contexts and can potentially shape future state behavior. Consequently, they lead to specific interactions with others based on shared historical experiences. (Flockhart, 2016, p.87).

Furthermore, historical constructions shape collective identities which can change or evolve. This means that states execute policies consistent with identity-related norms. (Flockhart, 2016, pp.86-87)

Additionally, it is believed that public opinion highly influences foreign policy. Constructivists argue that public opinion is socially constructed by political narratives, media coverage and discourse. Public opinion can pressure governments to align with popular visions. (Flockhart, 2016, p.86). Besides the traditional reference to anti-Vietnam War protests that halted American military action in the country, more recently, Finland's 2023 NATO accession was driven by public opinion shifts. Pre- the 2022 Ukraine War, only 21 % of Finns backed NATO membership. These numbers skyrocketed post- the Russian invasion to 82 % in November 2023 when the accession was enacted. Overall, general sentiment influences policymakers' calculations on the foreign policy front. (Forsberg, 2024).

Accordingly, the paper utilizes both constructivist and liberal explanations to explore Spanish foreign policy toward recent Israel-Palestine War While Spanish policy may seem liberal at the first glance, it is grounded in historical and societal factors.

Spain's Liberal Approach

Liberalism can shed light on Spanish foreign policy towards the conflict. Its explanation can be divided into three main categories: working within the EU, supporting internationally backed United Nations (UN) resolutions and bodies, and respecting international law.

First, Spain alone leads the pro-Palestinian trend within the EU, while Germany and France have repeatedly promoted Israel's right to defend itself (Hage, 2024). For example, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez stated in November 2023, "The first act of my new government in foreign

policy will be to work in Europe to recognize Palestine” (O’Donoghue, 2023). Sanchez tried to frame his moves in a European context, noting that there was a “feeling of frustration within the European Union” (Al Jazeera English, 2024). This confirms the liberal premise that liberal states utilize international organizations to promote peaceful conflict resolutions.

Second, Spain led a movement within the EU to participate in sanctions against extremist leaders and Israeli settlers (Liel, 2024). Sánchez also called on the EU to sever strategic ties with Israel for violating international humanitarian law (Hage, 2024). In addition, Spain and Ireland called on the European Commission to review the Association Agreement with Israel, which strengthens trade and scientific relations between them. The request for review was rejected by six European states, including Italy and Germany (Junyent, 2024). Here, liberalism falls short in explaining why Spain backs this human rights diplomacy. All EU societies presumably have a liberal framework; thus, a harsher stance towards human rights violations should have been adopted as argued by liberals.

Spain's stance reflects its commitment to UN resolutions and institutions. First, on October 27, 2023, Spain and other 119 states voted in the UN General Assembly in favor of an immediate truce and commitment to international humanitarian law (Kausch, 2024). In May 2024, Spain voted alongside 142 other states out of the total 193 in the UN General Assembly in favor of Palestine’s membership (Kausch, 2024). Therefore, Spanish voting patterns are in line with international institutions, as per liberalism. It is noteworthy that Madrid is following the international majority in its foreign policy from a liberal perspective.

The EU's response to Israeli allegations regarding the involvement of 12 UNRWA members in the October 7 attacks further reveals problems in the liberal assumptions. Post Israel’s allegations, Germany and Italy, the second largest donors of UNRWA cut off their respective 202.1

million and 18 million dollars funding. (Arab News, 2024; Junyent, 2024; UN Watch, 2024). In contrast, Spain has provided financial support to UNRWA amounting to €18.5 million in addition to giving the green light for an additional €15 million in December 2023 (Chambers, 2024). José Manuel Alber, the Spanish foreign minister, clearly stated “UNRWA is indispensable. There is no substitute for UNRWA.” He then added, “They give food and emergency aid to refugees. If they are not sufficiently funded, they will not feed these people.” (Arab News, 2024). These statements refer to Spain's emphasis on the role of UN bodies and the rules-based order. Therefore, this raises questions about the absent role of EU liberal societies that should have pushed for a liberal foreign policy agenda.

Referencing to International law is central to Spanish state discourse. Spain's Foreign Minister Alber's speech after the Arab-Spanish Summit in September 2024 highlights his support in implementing the two-state solution. For example, he stated, “The time for talking about the two-state solution is gone. Now is the time for implementation.” He also repeatedly reinforced the concept of international law through phrases such as “We must uphold international law” and “We must go in line with international law” (Al Arabiya English, 2024). Simultaneously during Sanchez's visit to Israel in November 2023, he called on Netanyahu to respect international law, end the humanitarian catastrophe, and adhere to international humanitarian law (Dodman, 2024).

The question is, if Madrid's moves are truly derived from the EU liberal normative values, why did major European powers not follow suit? From a liberal point of view, EU-Israeli trade, 30% of Israeli exports, should have been suspended over human rights violations. (Junyent, 2024). Not to mention German and Italian alignment with Israeli propaganda as mentioned above.

Spanish Pro-Palestinian Historical Constructions

The Spanish position towards the conflict has been shaped by two major factors: a consistent pro-Arab approach and a collective memory of oppression. First, Spanish Israeli relations have historically been tense due to the General Francisco Franco regime's closeness to Nazi Germany. Thus, Israel vocally opposed Spain's UN membership, as Spain did not vote in favor of the UN's plan to partition Palestine in 1947 (Álvarez & Alvariño, n.d.). Israeli hostility prompted Franco to approach the Arabs, taking advantage of the historical relationship and geographical proximity (Hage, 2024). EU-driven, Spain's late recognition of Israel in 1986 showcased that Spain does not perceive Israel as an ally.

After 1945, Spain established close relations with Arab states such as Egypt, Iraq, Libya and Saudi Arabia to break its international isolation (Álvarez & Alvariño, n.d.). Spain also condemned the Israeli occupation of Sinai, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem in 1967. Moreover, Spain did not allow the United States to use its military bases to send arms to Israel during the 1973 war (Álvarez & Alvariño, n.d.). On November 22, 1974, Spain voted in favour of UN General Assembly Resolutions 3236 and 3237, which recognized the right of Palestinian self-determination and the Palestine Liberation Organization as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people (Álvarez & Alvariño, n.d.). Finally, Spanish Prime Minister Adolfo Suarez Gonzalez was the first European leader to receive PLO leader Yasser Arafat. Therefore, Spanish identity is constructed on the basis of a historical proximity with the Arabs and hostile Israeli positions towards Madrid.

Eventually, the Spanish collective consciousness emphasizes a strong anti-oppression stance. For instance, the city of Guernica, the headquarters of the Republican resistance, was bombed by a Nazi German and Italian aircraft in 1937, killing 1,645 people (Chambers, 2024). Therefore, Israel's 1982 war on Lebanon and the Sabra and Shatila massacres were portrayed in Spanish

public opinion as “hostile” and Israel as an “oppressor” (Buheji & Hasan, 2024, p.3). Thus, when Spain recognized Israel, the move was not met with approval by large segments of Spaniards. Consequently, the “Palestinian Group in Catalonia” was founded to support Palestinian human rights and the right to self-determination (Chambers, 2024).

The Israeli actions thus served to build a historical sense of sympathy and frame Palestinians as “victims” rather than “terrorists.”. This means that the liberal norms are grounded in Spanish societal experiences that prompt the state to execute identity-based policies.

Spanish Anti-oppression Norm

Based on the above information, the historical construction of Spanish identity and attitude towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has produced an “anti-oppression norm.” For instance, on December 8, 2023, 3,000 people lined up to form a human mosaic of the Palestinian flag in the city of Guernica, the same city that was bombed in 1937 (Dodman, 2024). Thus, When Germany and Austria cut their funding to UNRWA, Igor Otxoa, spokesman for the Guernica Palestine Organization, stated that they “have always felt sympathy for the Palestinian people who suffered under dictatorship” (Debora, 2023). Therefore, the Spanish position is socially constructed via historical experiences in line with constructivism.

In addition, the Spanish perceptions towards Palestinians play a crucial role in shaping Madrid's foreign policy. This can be seen by analyzing the Spanish newspapers' coverage of the conflict. For example, the headline of EL Pais came as follows: “Feel the Pain of our brothers and sisters from Gaza.” *El Mundo* also reported, “The horrors of the mothers of Gaza” (Fürst, 2024, p. 31). Thus, this highlights the anti-oppression norm through the emphasis on human suffering in Gaza.

Moreover, Following the International Court of Justice's ruling that referred to the "plausibility of Israel committing genocide in the Gaza Strip", more than 100 anti-Israel demonstrations took place in various Spanish cities (Chambers, 2024). It is relevant to highlight that on February 17, 2024, six ministers, including Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and Minister of Transport Oscar Puente, participated in demonstrations in support of the ceasefire in Gaza (Buheji & Hasan, 2024, p. 9). Thus, this confirms the constructivist argument that foreign policy is shaped by societal support.

Therefore, Spanish support for "liberal" values such as peace and human rights is distinguished from that of its European counterparts. This is viewed clearly in the Spanish-European divergent opinion polls. For example, a survey conducted by Enríquez and Martínez (2024) revealed that 78% of Spaniards believe that EU member states should now recognize Palestine. Additionally, 50% of Spaniards consider Israel responsible for the current war. Finally, 60% of Spaniards support the two-state solution. (Kausch, 2024). In fact, according to a study conducted in May 2023, the Spanish people are the most pro-Palestinian people in Western Europe (Hage, 2024). This reinforces Sanchez's statement in an interview with Al Jazeera English (2024) "The majority of our citizens believe that we need peace." Accordingly, Spanish public sentiment drives the state's foreign policy.

On the contrary, only 15% of Germans support Palestine and 19% of Italians support Palestine. In fact, only 4% of Germans care about the Arab-Israeli conflict in the first place. The figure is 6% among Danes (Conboye & Smith, 2023). Thus, the EU public opinion cannot be deemed pro-Palestinian. This means that other EU societies did not undergo the same historical experiences as the Spanish one. This led to a different shared understanding among them regarding the Palestinians.

Conclusion

This paper argues that liberalism's explanatory power is limited in explaining Spanish foreign policy vis- a-vis the post- October 2023 Israel-Palestine War. It sheds light on Spanish behavior within the EU and the UN and its constant reference to international law. These main Spanish attitudes were demonstrated through a thorough examination of the discourse of Spanish state officials. Nevertheless, liberal theory does not provide a deeper explanation of Madrid's stance, which is distinguished from that of its EU counterparts such as Italy and Germany.

In contrast, constructivist explanations include Spanish identity construction derived from historical proximity. In addition, the paper referred to previous behavioral patterns and social support for Palestine. This social support was evidenced by opinion polls and surveys. Consequently, this perceived Spanish liberal position is based on social processes and norms such as the anti-oppression norm. However, it should be noted that the literature on Spanish-Palestinian interactions is limited and highly descriptive. Thus, more scholarly and academic work is needed on the topic.

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