



**Gulf Research Center**  
Knowledge for All

# Spain - GCC Relations





## 1. Key Domestic Developments

On July 23, 2023, Spain headed to the polls for a snap general election called by Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez after his Socialist Party (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party - PSOE) suffered heavy losses in the local elections held in May. The People's Party (PP), led by Alberto Núñez Feijóo, received the most votes, with 136 out of 350 in the Congress of Deputies (33% of total votes), overtaking the PSOE at 122 seats. However, both parties fell short of the 176 seats needed to obtain an absolute majority. Following the elections, Prime Minister Sánchez announced a controversial deal with the Together for Catalonia (Junts) party toward an amnesty law over Catalonia's 2017 separatist bid. By winning the backing of the Catalan separatists, Sánchez secured enough votes to secure himself another four-year term. The deal, however, sparked a series of protests in Spanish cities with over 170,000 demonstrators joining, including PP leader Feijóo and Santiago Abascal, leader of the VOX party.

Pedro Sánchez's election marks the beginning of the third consecutive parliamentary term led by the PSOE. In addition to the controversial Amnesty Law, the new government is facing



various challenges in four key areas: territorial organization, coexistence, foreign policy, and digital transformation, according to The Conversation. The issue of taxes continues to lead to regional disputes in Catalonia, Galicia, Valencia, and Andalusia. The ongoing polarization, as evidenced by the protests and media, continues to make it harder for the PSOE to create national harmony, regain the public's trust, and modernize the public administration. Lastly, the new government's allocation of 20 billion euros to digital transformation has been a concern for Spanish citizens not only in legal regulation, but also taxation, industry, and job creation.

### Key Spanish Economic and Social Data

- GDP: \$1.68 trillion (2024)
- GDP per capita: \$34.93 thousand (2024)
- Annual Growth Rate: 1.7% (2024)
- Inflation: 3.9% (2024)
- Population: 47.99 million (2024)
- Unemployment Rate: 11.3 % (2024)
- Credit Rating: Standard & Poor: A with a stable outlook. Moody: Baal with a stable outlook. Fitch: A- with a stable outlook. DBRS: A with a stable outlook.

Spain's economy is a well-developed social market economy. It has the world's sixteenth-largest and Europe's sixth-largest nominal GDP. Spain is a member of the European Union, the eurozone, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, as well as the World Trade Organization. In 2021, Spain was the world's twentieth-largest exporter and sixteenth-largest importer. The automotive, medical technology, chemicals, shipbuilding, tourism, and textile industries are some of Spain's



most important economic sectors. The Spanish economy expanded by 2.5% in 2023, marginally above what was projected. Private consumption and, to a lesser extent investment, were the key drivers of GDP growth. External demand, which contributed negatively to economic expansion in the second and third quarters of last year, also picked up in the fourth quarter.

## 2. Spanish Foreign Policy

Spanish foreign policy aims to address four major global fault lines. The first being socioeconomic, with increasingly concentrated wealth accumulation, a less fair playing field, and growing disparities within countries, all exacerbated by the lack of a new economic paradigm since the Great Recession of 2008. The second is on the environmental and demographic front which translates into restrictions for human development and well-being, as well as severe migratory concerns. The third is a technical fault line, with rapid change creating development gaps between countries and areas, presenting tremendous challenges but also massive potential. Lastly, and more broadly, there is a political and governance divide caused by a lack of public trust in institutions.

Spain's response to these global challenges are characterized by four main lines of action. First, to promote full and guaranteed human rights in its foreign policy, including support for democratization. Second, the commitment to an equitable economy and an integrated and inclusive society, which revises the parameters of growth and well-being, works towards the creation of a new global, intergenerational social contract, and promotes fair norms on a global level. Third, the defense of a more sustainable, resilient, habitable, and greener planet, where one aspires to be at the forefront in terms of climate diplomacy issues like combating desertification. Finally, a determined commitment to the improvement

of global governance mechanisms, beginning with strengthening the European project itself, intensifying its social dimension and proximity to citizens, and focusing on achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda.

Spain's top priorities in the Maghreb and Middle East regions are: (1) promoting an area of security and political stability to address threats such as terrorism and organized crime; (2) building an area of shared prosperity by strengthening economic ties; (3) promoting democratic values and human rights; (4) fostering cultural and human contacts; (5) fostering regional integration through existing formats such as the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and the 5+5 Forum; (6) managing the growing migration flows through the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic routes; (7) strengthening energy and climate dialogue; (8) contributing to economic recovery through business activity and economic diplomacy; and (9) contributing to UN efforts to reach a political solution to regional disputes in accordance with international parameters.

In a speech in November 2023, Prime Minister Sánchez promised that his new government's "first commitment" on foreign policy would be to "work in Europe and Spain to recognize the Palestinian state." According to Isaías Barreñada, a professor at the Complutense University of Madrid, Sánchez hopes his position will have "a ripple effect" on the rest of the EU. The stance comes at a time when many Western countries are facing criticism in the Arab world for being too one-sided in favor of Israel. While Prime Minister Sanchez stated that he was "on the side of Israel" in the face of "the terrorist attack" committed by Hamas on October 7, he also called on Israel to put an end to the "indiscriminate killing of Palestinians." Following another statement where the Prime Minister said he had "serious doubts that Israel is complying with international humanitarian law," Israel recalled its ambassador to Spain. Spanish Foreign Minister Jose Manuel



Albares has stated that the Spanish government believes that the suffering of innocent victims of Hamas and the Israeli attacks on Gaza are “equally unbearable.” “What we are trying to do is help peace, stability, and prosperity to return to the Middle East,” he said.

Spain’s foreign policy is firmly anchored in its unwavering commitment to multilateralism and the United Nations. This conviction stems from the belief that the global challenges confronting the international community, including but not limited to peacekeeping and security, poverty alleviation and sustainable development,

promotion of human rights and their protection, and the battle against climate change, can only be addressed efficiently through the framework of multilateralism and the United Nations.

### Key Foreign Policy Initiatives

- As part of the Spanish Presidency of the European Union from July to December 2023, the main lines of action outlined include reindustrializing the EU and guaranteeing its open strategic autonomy, advancing in the green transition, promoting greater social and economic justice, and strengthening European unity

		Effort	Outcome
	1 Advance the European Green Deal as a transformative peace project and create a vision for the next EGD		
	2 Strengthen accountability and the rule of law and promote environmental justice		
	3 Ensure energy security while tackling the climate emergency		
	4 Reverse the dramatic loss of biodiversity and put EU on a pathway to healthy soils		
	5 Tackle pressure on surface and groundwater and ensure clean water for all		
	6 Drive a transition towards sustainable food and agriculture		
	7 Ensure clean air towards zero environmental and health impacts		
	8 Fast track negotiations on the REACH and CLP Revisions to promote a toxic-free environment		
	9 Shift towards a zero-pollution industry		
	10 Grasp the full potential of the circular economy		

Source: [European Environmental Bureau](#)

On Ukraine’s future, Prime Minister Sanchez emphasized the importance of supporting the country’s reconstruction. As a result, Spain announced a contribution of approximately 250 million euros through the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development during the Lugano Conference on Ukraine’s Recovery in July 2022.



### 3. Spain-GCC Fact Sheet

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مركز الخليج للأبحاث  
البحرانية للدراسات والبحوث

## Spain - GCC Trade Relations 2023

**15.48** Billion USD

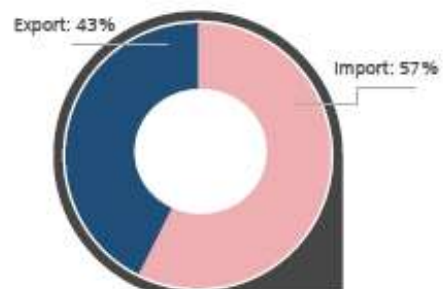
Total trade between Spain and GCC countries in 2022

**KSA/ UAE/ Qatar**

Top trade partners with Spain in 2022

**-2.3** Billion USD

Spain's trade balance with GCC countries in 2022



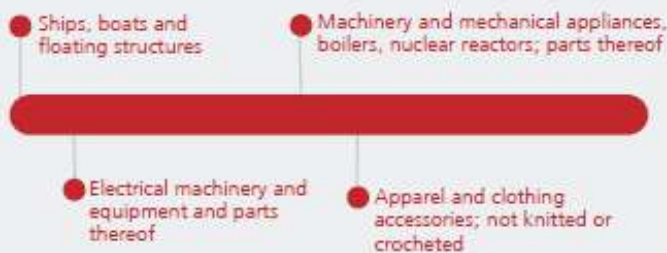
**1.6%**

GCC countries share in Spain's total exports 2022

**6.59** Billion USD

Spain exports to the GCC countries in 2022

#### Spain's Top exports to the GCC countries



**1.7 %**

GCC countries share in Spain's total trade in 2022

**8.89** Billion USD

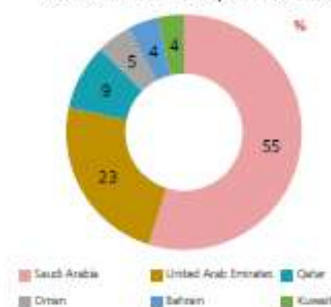
Spain imports from the GCC countries in 2022

#### Top imports from the GCC countries

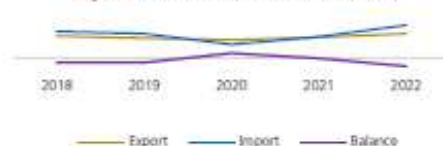


- Saudi Arabia is Spain's top GCC trade partner, accounting for approximately 55% of Spain's total trade with the GCC countries, followed by United Arab of Emirates with 23% in 2022.
- The GCC countries achieved a trade surplus with Spain amounting to \$2.3 billion in 2022.

GCC countries share in Spain Trade in 2022



Spain Trade with GCC countries -Billion USD



- The trade between Spain and GCC countries fluctuated during the past five years; the lowest was in 2020. This is due to the spread of the "Covid-19".

Source: United Nations Comtrade database



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### *Establishment of Diplomatic Relationships*

- Spain-GCC Diplomatic Relations: Saudi Arabia (1952), Kuwait (1964), Bahrain (1971), United Arab Emirates (1972), Qatar (1972), and Oman (1972).

### *Key Research Centers and Think Tanks*

- [Barcelona Centre for International Affairs](#)
- [Elcano Royal Institute](#)
- [Real Academia de Ciencias Morales y Políticas](#)
- [Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos](#)
- [Institut Barcelona Estudis Internacionales](#)
- [European Institute of the Mediterranean](#)

### *Selected Key Regional Experts*

- [Dr. Charles Powell CMG](#)
- [Haizam Amirah Fernández](#)
- [Dr. Federico Steinberg](#)
- [Eduard Soler](#)

- [Eckart Woertz](#)
- [Pol Morillas](#)
- [Ambassador Senén Florensa](#)

### *4. Key Developments in Spain-GCC Relations*

The Kingdom of Spain enjoys healthy and vibrant relations with the GCC states. In recent years, as Spain recognizes the strategic importance of the Gulf region, there has been increased attention to developing cooperation in various sectors such as investment, tourism, and culture. Diplomatic visits and the signing of bilateral agreements reflect Spain's commitment to engaging with the Gulf countries on political, economic, and cultural levels. Moreover, Spain's participation in multilateral forums such as the GCC-EU ministerial meetings has provided a platform for discussing and promoting regional security, trade, and stability. Spain has also been one of the most vocal states in the EU in condemning Israel's actions in Palestine.

#### *Spain-Saudi Arabia*

- A Saudi delegation from the Ministry of Tourism, headed by Deputy Minister of Tourism for International Affairs Sultan Al Musallam, took part in the meeting of the Committee for Activating the Saudi-Spanish Partnership in the Field of Tourism held in Madrid on January 25,




2024, The two sides discussed ways to strengthen the strategic partnership in tourism through initiatives aimed at training tourism employees in hospitality and hotel management services in the most prominent institutes in Spain.

- A meeting between Spanish Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Albares Bueno and representatives of Saudi civil society took place in February 2024, to whom he conveyed Spain's desire to continue strengthening cultural and economic ties. In subsequent meetings with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan and the Saudi Minister of Economy, the situation in the region was also discussed, as well as the common desire to further advance the growing bilateral economic agenda.
- Spain's then Secretary of State for Foreign and Global Affairs, Ángeles Moreno Bau, paid a visit to Saudi Arabia in August 2023 on the occasion of the Ministerial Meeting of the Global Coalition against DAESH.
- Saudi Arabia's Deputy Foreign Minister, H.E. Waleed Al-Khuraiji, attended a celebration at the Spanish embassy in Riyadh on January 15, 2023, in honor of the Kingdom's hosting of the 2023 Spanish Super Cup. Spain's ambassador to the Kingdom welcomed the Saudi Minister, who lauded the two kingdoms' improved connections in many disciplines, including sports.
- A high-level delegation of key government and private sector figures from Saudi Arabia, traveled to Madrid in October 2022 for the third Saudi-Spanish Joint Committee (SSJC) as Saudi Arabia and Spain look to further strengthen their longstanding bilateral relations.
- The Saudi ministries of investment and tourism held the Saudi-Spanish Investment Forum with the participation of a large commercial and public delegation from both sides in June 2022. The forum enabled private-sector partnerships and explored new opportunities in various sectors.

## Spain-United Arab Emirates

- The United Arab Emirates and Spain committed to strengthening their bilateral relationship, exploring new avenues for collaboration, and addressing regional and international concerns following a recent exchange of messages between their leaders in February 2024. President His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan received a written message from King Felipe VI of Spain, conveyed by Foreign Minister José Manuel Albares. The message highlighted the importance of fostering ties between the two nations and expressed a desire to expand cooperation across various sectors. His Highness Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Vice President and Chairman of the Presidential Court, received Minister Albares at Qasr Al Watan in Abu Dhabi. During their meeting, both sides emphasized the potential for enhanced collaboration in key areas like the economy, investment, development, education, and culture.
- H.E. Dr. Thani bin Ahmed Al Zeyoudi, UAE Minister of State for Foreign Trade, met with Xiana Mendez, Secretary of State for Trade at the Spanish Ministry of Industry, Trade and Tourism, and to promote cooperation in the areas of economics and trade on February 23, 2023. Emphasizing the deep historical relations between the UAE and Spain, H.E. Dr. Al Zeyoudi pointed out that both leaders remain keen on enhancing the relationship in support of their respective national development visions.
- Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez paid an official visit to the UAE to celebrate Spain's National Day at the Dubai Expo on February 3, 2022. Sánchez and H.H. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed of Abu Dhabi signed a joint statement of broad political and economic significance that creates a strategic partnership between Spain and the UAE. It was the first trip by a Spanish Prime Minister to the UAE since 2011. The visit had two objectives: to support and strengthen the presence of Spanish companies in the UAE within



the framework of the Universal Exposition and to relaunch the relationship between Spain and the Emirates, raising it to a strategic level.

### Spain-Qatar

- The Minister for Foreign Affairs, José Manuel Albares visited Qatar in February 2024 where he was received by Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. Afterward, he met with the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister to discuss bilateral relations and the situation in the Middle East. Both sides agreed on the importance of joining forces to achieve peace in the region. Foreign Minister Albares also held a meeting with representatives of Spanish companies in Qatar as well as met with the Qatari Businesswomen Association.

- PM Sánchez received the Emir of Qatar, H.H. Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, during his first official visit to Spain, at Moncloa Palace on the 50th anniversary of their diplomatic relations on May 18, 2022. Spain and Qatar agreed to elevate their bilateral relations to a strategic partnership, deepening the two nations' economic and political connections.

- Spanish ambassador H.E. Javier Carbajosa Sanchez was joined by Qatar's Minister of Transport H.E. Jassim bin Saif Al-Sulaiti for the Spanish National Day celebration held on October 12, 2023. Amb. Sánchez remarked that “at the political level, 15 bilateral agreements and MOUs have been signed during the past two years, [covering] diverse areas such as education, economy, and science. In addition, Spain has agreed with Qatar on a visa-waiver agreement for diplomatic and special passports. Moreover, Spain supports the ongoing negotiations between the State of Qatar and the European Commission to lift the visa requirement for Qatari nationals.”

### Spain-Oman

- Sultan Haitham bin Tariq of the Sultanate of Oman discussed bilateral relations with King Felipe VI of Spain in October 2023, during a phone

call between both sides. They discussed bilateral relations between the two countries and ways to enhance and develop them in various fields. In addition, they exchanged views regarding a number of regional and international issues of common interest.

- On December 18, 2023, Oman's Ambassador of Spain, Omar Said Omar Alkathiri met with the Barcelona Free Zone to review opportunities for cooperation. The ambassador also visited the Digitization Research and Development Center for fourth-generation technology for industries.

- H.E. Sayyid Badr bin Hamad Al Busaidi, Oman's Minister of Foreign Affairs, spoke with José Manuel Albares, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Spain, on October 14, 2022, about bilateral relations between the two countries, the development of cooperation in numerous fields, and the intention to sign more bilateral cooperation agreements. During the call, the Spanish minister expressed his country's support for reciprocal exemption of official visas between the two nations, as well as at the European Schengen Visa level.

### Spain-Bahrain

- Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani, met the Minister of Foreign Affairs José Manuel Albares at the United Nations headquarters in New York, on the sidelines of the 78th session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA 78) in September 2023. The two sides discussed the course of the close relations between the two countries, areas of bilateral cooperation, and ways to enhance and develop relations, in addition to issues of common interest. The meeting was attended by the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Bahrain to the Kingdom of Spain, Fawaz bin Mohammed Al Khalifa, as well as the Foreign Minister's accompanying delegation.

- Shaikh Fawaz bin Mohammed Al Khalifa, Bahraini Ambassador to Spain, hosted a reception





in Madrid on December 13, 2023, on the occasion of the Kingdom of Bahrain’s National Day. Amb. Fawaz bin Mohammed affirmed the depth of the long-standing relations between the two kingdoms, stressing Bahrain’s great interest in bolstering its existing cooperation with Spain at all levels.

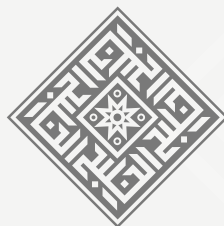
- The Minister of Foreign Affairs, H.E. Dr. Abdullatif Al Zayani, received the Kuwait-based Ambassador of Spain to Bahrain, Miguel Jose Moro Aguilar, on October 21, 2021. H.E. Dr. Al Zayani and the Spanish ambassador reviewed the excellent ties between the two countries and ways of propelling them to higher levels. The meeting also covered regional and international issues of common interest.

### Spain-Kuwait

- The Spanish Embassy in Kuwait held a reception at the residence of Spanish Ambassador Miguel Moro Aguilar to mark the end of the six-month Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, which lasted from July 1 until December 31, 2023.
- In Madrid, Kuwaiti Ambassador to Spain, Khalifa Al-Kharafi, praised the “special and deep-rooted” bilateral ties with the Kingdom,

especially in investment and academia during the annual Diplomatic Corps Reception, hosted by King Felipe VI at the Royal Palace Madrid on February 1, 2024. During this conference, Spain’s significant role in urging the European Union to reject the Israeli occupation of Gaza was highlighted.

- Speaking to businessmen and representatives of foreign companies on October 1, 2022, Spanish Ambassador to Kuwait, Miguel Aguilar, said the diplomatic relations with Kuwait have been historically excellent but have yet to reach their full potential in terms of economic ties. Ambassador Aguilar went on to say: “We have to be serious in developing these relations in all fields, especially the economic, to raise the level of political and diplomatic relations between our two countries; we can do better, and we are striving to do just that.”
- Political consultations between the two sides at the Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs level were held in Madrid in June 2022. Issues discussed included high-level contacts, the Joint Trade Committee, and the ways to increase the volume of our bilateral exchange and cooperation in the realms of defense, culture, promotion of the Spanish language, science, and sport



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