

Denmark in the Middle East

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ISIS fighter beheading boy, 16, in Syria. (photo credit: ARAB MEDIA)

More than 60 countries – including Denmark – joined the Western coalition against Islamic State (ISIS). In August 2015 the Danish parliament approved military assistance using 130J transport planes. It also recently approved the participation of Danish F-16s in an air-strikes across Syria alongside Iraqi and Kurdish security forces.

It may be assumed that Denmark's military involvement in Syria will be according to American considerations. Denmark tends to be cautious about taking risks and is not capable of sending massive numbers of troops to the region or of being a "game changer." It should be added that any government that suffers losses faces public criticism regarding deeper intervention. Nevertheless in recent years Denmark has succeeded in promoting its interests globally.

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How has Denmark managed to become a more significant player in the region? During a foreign affairs committee meeting at the Danish Parliament (Udenrigspolitisk Nævn), Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen stated that Denmark wished to take part in the fight against ISIS in light of the ISIS threat to the stability of Denmark and Europe. Consequently, the Danish Defense Ministry sought to increase its budget allocation in order to meet the expectations of this Danish foreign policy objective.

Danish government officials believe that the success of ISIS from Syria to Iraq stems from the failure of the Iraqi government to both govern and provide political opportunities to the Sunni population. More importantly, ISIS threatens to create new waves of refugees seeking to come to Denmark, and the Danish prime minister fears that an influx of refugees will result in social instability.

A classified brief about the consequences of the influx of refugees in 2016 was recently exposed in an internal memorandum of the local government authority (KL). According to the memorandum, the local authorities would likely collapse under the burden of refugees. Denmark is also concerned by the manifestation of young people (second generation of immigrants) joining the fighting in Syria.

In 1864, Denmark lost Schleswig-Holstein to Germany and underwent a profound change in its foreign policy which resulted in its refusal to intervene in international conflicts, adopting a policy of neutrality. Almost 140 years later the Viking state awakened.

In November 2001, a government led by Anders Fogh Rasmussen and composed of a coalition between the Liberal Party (Venstre) and the Conservative Party (Konservative Folkeparti) rose to power, with parliamentary support from the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti). This led to a dramatic change in Danish foreign policy. The government adopted a firm policy that encouraged intervention in the Middle East in order to become a significant player in Europe.

Ostensibly Denmark's influence in the region seems immaterial, but in fact Denmark participated in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; in the UN peacekeeping force in Lebanon from 2006 to 2011; in the bombing of Libya in 2011; assisted in the disposal of Syrian President Bashar Assad's chemical weapons in 2013 and also attempted to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

During Denmark's presidency of the EU in 2002, Lars Faaborg-Andersen, then a senior diplomat in the Foreign Ministry and currently EU ambassador to Israel, laid down the peace initiative known as the "Road Map."

Another sign of Denmark's desire to take an active role in the region can be found in the appointment of its ambassador to Israel, Jesper Vahr, who served as Anders Rasmussen's cabinet chief at NATO

headquarters in Brussels and was one of the figures who influenced Danish foreign policy during the Anders Rasmussen government. At NATO Vahr initiated widespread reform of NATO 's core tasks and in the organization of NATO 's international headquarters.

Anders Rasmussen promoted foreign policy designed to strengthen democratic values, not only through diplomacy but also and even mainly through military force. Danish involvement was often justified as humanitarian intervention or R2P (Responsibility to Protect), as seen recently in Libya. During Rasmussen's tenure Denmark became an important ally of the administration of George W. Bush and its campaign in Iraq.

The idealism of Bush's policy was compatible to the military activism Rasmussen sought to promote. As a result Denmark suffered heavy losses in Afghanistan, sparking a debate within the Danish military in which senior officers debated whether it was justified to send troops on dangerous missions on the front line. As compensation for Rasmussen's foreign policy in Afghanistan and Iraq, Denmark was among the countries with which NATO consulted, and later on it approved Rasmussen's appointment as secretary general of NATO .

Comparing the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns, Danish involvement in Syria is more similar to the latter. Recognition that ISIS threatens not only the stability of Europe but mainly of Denmark, the new-old conservative government of Lars Rasmussen, the successor of Anders Rasmussen, was elected to justify a more active role of the Danish military in the Middle East and consequently on Syrian soil. Copenhagen suffered a terrorist attack last year and considers it to have been motivated by the radical ideology of ISIS.

In the long term, Denmark will try to leverage its involvement as a small country to establish dialogue perhaps through "track two diplomacy" between regional powers and ethnic groups. Denmark is expected to use Danish aid organizations that have already succeeded in establishing solid relationships with various parties in Syria and Iraq. Although Denmark was "labeled" an enemy of Islam following the publication in 2006 of drawings considered insulting to the Prophet Muhammad in the Danish newspaper Jyllands Posten, it will try to create a friendlier image toward the local population, as it did in the case of Afghanistan.

The implications for Israel may be learned from the recent visit to Israel of members of the Danish foreign affairs committee. Committee chairman Søren Espersen praised Israel as a democratic and free state, despite being under constant military threat. Espersen criticized Denmark for its participation in what he referred to as the well-known "chorus" of condemnation of Israel among the international community.

In other words – Denmark seeks to promote the values of democracy, but in fact attempts to deepen its hard-line intervention in the Middle East. Therefore, we can learn that the Nordic state will make extensive efforts to promote its agenda, and not just American interests.

This will be based on the following principles: • Denmark will attempt to take an active role as part of its strategy development and reform processes in the Middle East.

- The Danish aid organizations will publicly ensure that there will be adequate resources for development assistance to the region.
- It will preserve its self-perception of being a role model by making goodwill statements.
- Danish foreign assistance will be returned to the country in the form of consultant and service contracts.
- To advance itself politically, Denmark will increasingly implement “development foreign policy.”
- Denmark will be encouraged to continue to be flexible in allowing each recipient country/ethnic group to decide upon official or unofficial Danish government involvement.

This will allow Denmark to develop beneficial relationships between bilateral and multilateral channels.

While Obama’s retreat is widely perceived as a sign of weakness, Denmark sees it as an important opportunity. First, US policy influences Danish political dynamics, which have begun to experience a change in the global balance of power. Danish ministers wisely understand the global complexity of a radical and unexpected arena such as the Middle East, where a post-Obama administration will likely adopt a tentative and makeshift policy.

Even if the Danish intervention process has reached an appropriate balance, still Copenhagen and the regional departments at the Foreign Office, together with the Danish Development Cooperation, will need to be clear on issues related to non-European powers in the region. Denmark’s wish to become a key element in the region and strengthen its cooperation with a non-European power was evident when Lars Rasmussen held a private meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Continued Danish intervention in the region will serve Denmark’s goal of achieving senior status in NATO , and international prestige.

The author is a PhD candidate who has been awarded a Presidential Doctoral Fellowship of Excellence from Bar-Ilan University, where he is enrolled in the Graduate Program in Conflict Resolution, Management and Negotiation. His dissertation examines Scandinavian Mediation in the Israeli- Arab conflict.

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