



ROYAL DANISH DEFENCE COLLEGE



# CULTURAL AWARENESS

## DENMARK

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Coverphoto: Colourbox.dk  
ISBN 978-87-7147-129-8 (print)  
ISBN 978-87-7147-133-5 (pdf)  
1. edition, december 2015

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### **Purpose**

The goal of this cultural awareness leaflet is to provide a guide on Danish civilian and military culture for foreign personnel working with Danish forces.

This leaflet presents a Danish look at our cultural dispositions and biases, which a foreigner and coalition partner may experience in both Danish 'civilian' and military culture.

During cooperation and/or joint operations with Danish forces the reader will to a larger or smaller degree be in contact with Danish personnel, military or otherwise, and this guide can assist the reader in his/her interaction with Danish personnel. By giving the reader cultural awareness of Danish history, politics, geography, social structure and military culture, along with a short summary of the main characteristics of the three Services in Danish Defence, the guide will serve as an introduction to interaction and working with the Danes.

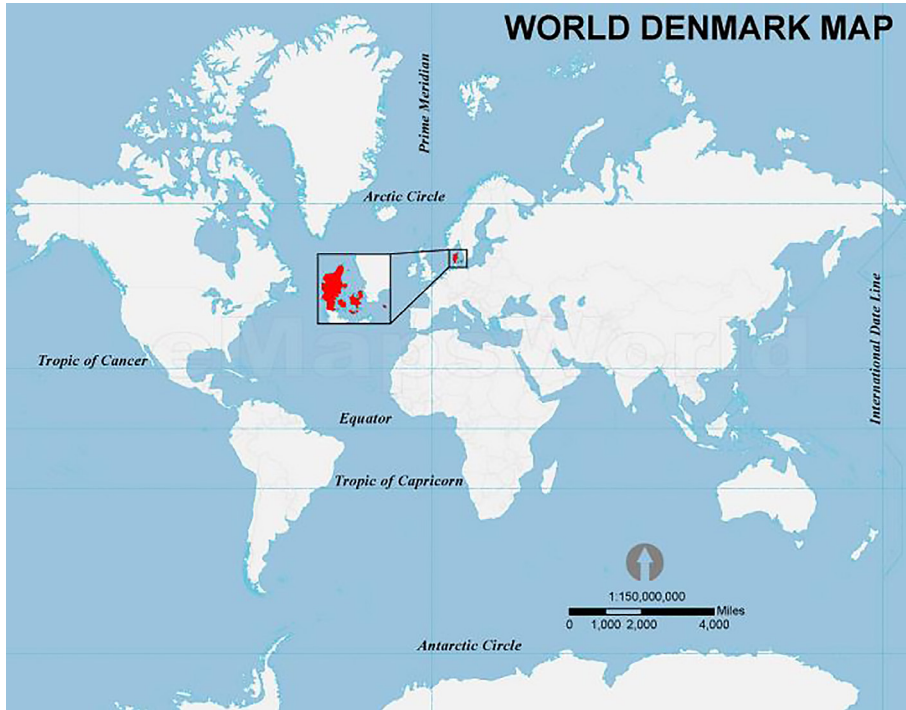
The advice and instructions provided in this manual are not exhaustive, and many Danes, civilian and military, may not act in accordance with the below information, nor necessarily agree with its characterisation of Danish politics, social structure or military culture, but this guide delivers a summary of our chosen research on these subjects and, hence, a best-possible look on Danish culture.

### **General advice and essentials on cross-cultural interaction**

- a. Be conscious of your own cultural background – you evaluate your international partners based on your own cultural dispositions. Practise having an open attitude – be curious about learning more about your new international partners in order to maximise professional cooperation and social interaction.
- b. Accept different ideas, notions, looks and behaviour.
- c. Try to learn about important historical events and cultural phenomena in Denmark, and try to understand how these things may affect the formal and informal cooperation, behaviour and concerns of your Danish colleagues.
- d. Accept the possibility of misunderstandings. Misunderstandings and deliberative 'noise' often occur when communicating across cultures.
- e. People from different cultures have different social ideas and professional procedures. If possible, spend time listening to your international partners. Interact with your Danish colleagues; this is the best way to learn more.

### The basics of Danish culture

Denmark is a small country and a constitutional monarchy with a long history. Denmark is a small, open economy with a highly developed, universal welfare system. Its geography consists of huge areas of flat, flowing fields that stand golden in summer, miles and miles of sandy coastline and 443 islands, 78 of them inhabited.



Its population is highly educated and economically very equal, partly because of a progressive income tax system.

A widely ethnically homogenous country with a universal welfare model and a Protestant history has produced a relatively easy-going, but diligent population that is inclined to work for satisfaction and social harmony with a close group of friends.

Below you will find a description of Danish 'civilian' and military culture, followed by a short summary of Denmark's geography, history, religion, politics and economy.

### Danish culture

Danish culture has been described by sociologists and writers in both negative and positive ways. However, at the intersection between all these different generalisations lies a culture derived partly from a peasant and sailing culture led by a small elite and partly from living through an, in a Danish perspective, traumatic national history, where the country has been reduced territorially from the status of a North Sea empire during consecutive wars since the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Shaped by defeats in wars in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries the focus has been on creating a large welfare state. Danes are characterised today by constituting a widely ethnically and economically homogenous group that does not emphasise status and social hierarchy and, in some ways, perceives the display of status and wealth negatively.

After Denmark's last big defeat in war at the hands of Bismarck's Prussia in 1864 over a border conflict regarding Schleswig-Holstein, the Danish author H. P. Holst declared that 'what is outwardly lost must be inwardly won'. Since then, the Danes have developed a culture characterised by a **high degree of informality and social flexibility**. One of the most prominent characteristics of this culture is the 'consensus culture', which affects all parts of Danish society. Also, Denmark's foreign policy has since the turn of the millennium developed into a more activist one, where the majority of the population consistently has supported the deployment of Danish soldiers in Iraq, Afghanistan and many other, smaller missions.

### The Danish consensus culture

A unique and dominant trait of Danish culture is the **consensus-seeking behaviour** found both at the lowest level, for example between two persons in a junior league football club or a cooperative housing association, and at the highest level of wage negotiations between powerful trade unions and employers' organisations.

The effort to reach consensus and compromise in everyday life is ingrained in Danish culture and can be found at the highest level in the parliamentary system, where nine parties debate even the smallest issues in committees. The typical government consists of minority coalitions generally supported by backing parties from the respective wing. Often, however, an effort is made to seek a compromise including as many parties as possible.

This overarching **consensus culture** consists of several characteristics, as described below:

### **Low power distance**

A consequence of the consensus culture is the **low power distance in Denmark**. For example, if the Prime Minister is on a tour of provincial upper secondary schools or the Minister of Finance is visiting a university, it is completely ordinary and even expected that the students address the minister by his or her first name before asking a provocative question about government policy. This is not to say that there is not a relatively clear social hierarchy in Denmark, but it is important for the international colleague to understand that this hierarchy is often completely obscured by the daily informal dealings between Danes in, for example, an army unit. It is not uncommon to attend a party in Copenhagen and find a carpenter discussing unemployment with an actual unemployed and a member of parliament in the corner of the bar.

### **High degree of individualism**

In Denmark the **low power distance coincides with a high degree of individualism**. Denmark, despite being a universal welfare state and having a widely homogenous population in terms of ethnicity and economic equality, is characterised by a very high degree of individualism. This is partly because of the welfare state itself, which has replaced the individual's dependence on the social security and employment opportunities of family networks with a dependence on the state as the primary provider of social security in everything from health care to child nursing and unemployment benefits. This development is part of the reason for the **deliberative and consensus-seeking nature of Danish social and professional culture**, which leads to another characteristic of the consensus culture: the tendency to question and discuss authority and designated courses of action, socially as well as professionally.

### **‘Janteloven’**

Danish culture is to a high degree characterised by ‘Janteloven’ or the ‘Jante Law’, coined by the Danish author Aksel Sandemose. The law is a collection of 10 commandments, beginning with ‘You must not believe that you are *anything*’. Difficult to translate directly, the law and its commandments basically state that you must not pretend to greatness in any way or form, or your friends and social peers will look unfavourable on you. Picked up and often used sarcastically by the population at large, the Jante Law does affect Danes’ perceptions of each other.

### **The Law of Jante**

- You're not to think you are anything special.
- You're not to think you are as good as us.
- You're not to think you are smarter than us.
- You're not to convince yourself that you are better than us.
- You're not to think you know more than us.
- You're not to think you are more important than us.
- You're not to think you are good at anything.
- You're not to laugh at us.
- You're not to think anyone cares about you.
- You're not to think you can teach us anything.

Possibly a remnant of a peasant culture with a small ruling class concentrated in the capital, the Jante Law is especially seen in official and social relations, where an implicit game of showing social value without showing off is constantly and subtly performed. This is so because the syndrome, basically a symptom of other Danes’ expectations of neighbourly modesty, clashes with the underplayed, but still very real self-confidence of the Danes.

### **Open nature of discussion and questioning of authority**

Another consequence is the **openness of debate in Denmark**. In the public debate, as well as between friends, there are few obstacles, such as class or cultural differences, to frank debate. Even the most basic member of the social hierarchy can deliver substantive or unfounded criticism and will receive attention from at least part of the population.

**This is, of course, less pronounced in professional settings**, but there is generally a more relaxed relationship between employer and employee in Denmark than in many other European countries, which is again related to the high degree of individualism and low power distance.



**Danes are permitted to lose face and admit publicly that they were wrong.** It is actually more of a taboo for, say, a politician to try to cover up and pretend that nothing wrong has occurred, or for a friend to consistently pretend that he is more educated or smart than your experience of him.

### **Irony, sarcasm and ‘dark humour’**

The phenomenon of humour is universal, but its application and interpretation is, of course, culturally dependent. What is humorous in one country, is not necessarily in another; there may even be wide differences. This is especially true in Denmark, where **two elements, irony and sarcasm, dominate.**

In the Danish perspective, irony is a form of expression where you, in order to amuse, state the opposite of what you are actually thinking in a way that makes your true opinion obvious. Naturally, it requires great linguistic familiarity and consciousness to decode an ironic remark. Ambiguity, self-contradictions and indirect jokes about either Danes or others are typical elements constituting the kind of irony Danes apply. For example, if a Dane botches a task completely, his or her employer could answer, ‘Well done’. However, it is not here understood as bitter criticism, but as a resigned, joking commentary.

Another aspect of Danish irony is the extensive use of self-irony, where Danes by directing the irony at themselves show to the public or their social or professional peers that they do not take themselves too seriously.

Sarcasm, also widely used in Denmark, is defined as a variation on irony, where mocking or spiteful remarks are phrased in more or less humorous ways. A classic Danish example of sarcasm is when someone is attempting something without much success, and another person then says, ‘That went well’. This example is illustrative because it, on the one hand, signals to the recipient the opinion of the sender, while the recipient at the same time is pacified, since it is virtually impossible to give an answer that keeps your dignity intact and refrains from showing self-effacing vulnerability and self-irony through signalling that you do not think too highly of yourself.

An important thing to consider when working with Danes is that they are not always able to identify the borders of sarcasm, and this can, in some cases, lead to misinterpretations and affect social relations negatively, if the international colleague is not aware that this is simply Danish culture.

Finally, another aspect of Danish sarcasm is the scepticism of **Danes towards too much overt praise and commendation**, as they are usually formed by the concept of the 'Jante Law'.

### **Danish (im)politeness**

Denmark, being a relatively homogenous nation, has a generalised type of **non-intensive politeness** in dealing with foreigners and acquaintances, which is used and understood by pretty much everyone, from young to old and high to low in Denmark. The Danish intention to express equality can give some foreigners the impression that Danes are impolite and too casual.

**Even though Danes in certain situations can be perceived as impolite**, for example by omitting what would normally be considered a polite form of address, Danes have other customs which do, in a Danish perspective, express politeness. While unintentionally leaving out the word 'please' when ordering food in a café, Danes, on the other hand, make extensive use of the word 'tak' (thanks). They, for example, express courtesy by saying 'tak for mad' after a meal, which can literally be translated into 'thanks for the food', and they say 'tak for I dag' (thank you for today) when leaving a pleasant company.

### **Social trust**

Denmark and its population are characterised by a very high degree of 'social trust' – a trust in strangers, which is expressed through the Danish system of government as well as in the everyday life of Danes. In the cities you will find infants put to sleep in their prams outside cafés and stores, and in the countryside you will come across unmanned vegetable stands relying on customers to place their payment in a box full of change.

In Denmark this high degree of social trust can partly be explained by the economically widely homogenous society and partly by the expansive safety net supplied by the welfare state. In other words, Danes' high degree of social trust is closely linked to their high sense of security: Danes live by the conviction that if something goes wrong, someone (the state) will be there to catch them if necessary.

However, Danish social trust should not only be viewed as a consequence of the welfare state – the welfare state can also be seen as a consequence or good example of trust. The fact that Danes are willing to pay a large amount in taxes, and the fact that they trust other people to do the same is, indeed, an expression of trust. In other words, Danes are not only trusting as a consequence of the welfare state, the welfare state is also a consequence of the population's trust in each other. It

has been argued that this social trust lays the foundation for what has many times been labelled the 'happiest country' in the world.

### The two main cultural potentials for miscommunication

The above characteristics of Danish culture all to varying extents have the potential to create miscommunication between Danes and international partners and colleagues. However, there are two main cultural issues which are responsible for most of the communication problems with Danes.

These are not necessarily, and perhaps rarely, an issue at all in international cooperation with Danish civilian and/or military personnel, but they should nonetheless be considered to prevent miscommunication from hindering goal attainment in an international context.

### The clash between open Danish discussion and international leadership principles

One great, if not the main, potential for miscommunication with Danes resides in the **clash between the Danish culture for open discussion and the leadership principles and, in a Danish perspective, traditions of other countries**. An authoritarian leader who demands professionalism and the exertion of energy based on his or her formal status (e.g. by pulling rank) can hit directly into a Danish culture of frank, open discussion about mistakes and alternatives to a given course of action.

### The clash between status culture and the Danish 'Jante Law'

As mentioned, the 'Jante Law' is prevalent in Denmark and can appear in professional contexts. It will most often be evident in the interplay with authoritarian leadership styles and is partly founded on a perceived righteous scepticism towards inefficient leadership or bureaucracy.

### Danish military culture

The Danish military is separated into three Services, Navy, Air Force and Army, which are all under the command of a central command, which again answers directly to the Ministry of Defence. In addition to these Services, the Danish military consists of the National Guard, consisting of reserve and part-time volunteers, the Special Operation Command.

### **A changing regimental culture**

The Danish army does not have one single culture, social or professional. Over the last 20 years the regimental structure has been reduced and the units have been merged into battalion-sized task forces. This means that there has been little time to cultivate the traditional regimental structures. The regimental structure still exists, but there are few regiments left, and they no longer have an operational function. This has instead become the responsibility of the Danish Division and two brigades in Denmark, who are fitted with units according to the task at hand, while the regiments exist primarily as a ceremonial container.



*Photo: Danish Defence*

### **Shared cross-service culture and implications of miscommunication**

A common set of values can be identified in the Danish military, and they are primarily created through the officers academies and NCO school structure. One major Danish characteristic is the **perspective of efficient time management**. The postponement of meetings or delaying of dinner times is almost taboo in Danish military culture. The Danes value, in their own perception, a very efficient use of the hours worked, especially in the military, and the set number of demanded hours worked is regulated and union-negotiated.

Combined with Danish society's 'Jante Law', low power distance and the Danish military's strong task-focussed and goal-oriented professional culture, the Danish

private, NCO and officer look unfavourably at **colleagues, Danish or international, who postpone or hold ineffective meetings, intrude in settled leisure time due to bad planning etc.**, as the very strict Danish perspective on time is highly ingrained and in civilian life perhaps even considered a civil right.

### **Cross-branch military culture – Danish administrative mind and Danish battle mind**

Despite the above, an interesting paradox exists in Danish military culture. In peacetime or non-conflict settings the culture is affected by the general, civilian social culture. The two major potentials for miscommunication, the Danish culture of open discussion and the 'Jante Law', are also relevant in the military context, especially concerning Danes' perception of leaders and subordinates who do not own up to their mistakes.

However, at the same time, Danes consider themselves defined by their military professionalism. This interesting paradox is a result of the same practical and task-focussed goal orientation of Danish culture, especially prevalent in the military; once a decision has been made, and an operation or assault has been initiated, the Danish 'battle mind' at all levels – staff, NCO and private – is characterised by little hesitation and great determination. In other words, the **consideration for the collective effort then overtakes the individualistic culture** and possible individual criticisms and biases.



*Photo: Danish Defence*

### The basics of Denmark

#### Geography – Half the size of Scotland

Denmark is small, totalling 16,640 square miles, which is half the size of Scotland and about the size of Vermont and New Hampshire combined.

Denmark consists of the Jutland peninsula, sticking northwards out of Germany with a 42-mile land border, and several islands, the two biggest being Funen and Zealand.

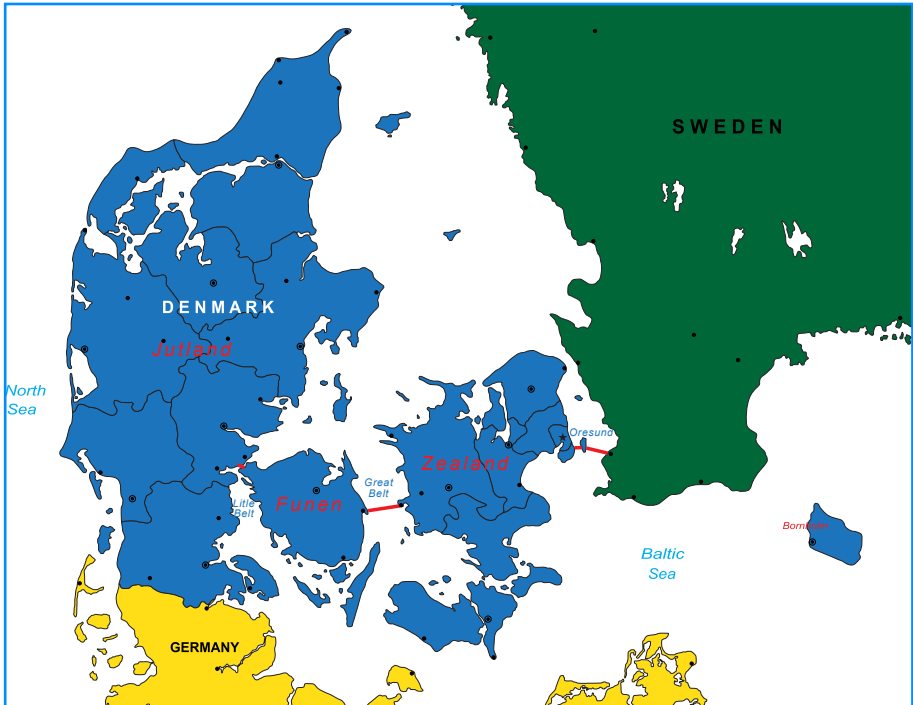
Denmark is a Nordic country with 5.5 million inhabitants and, along with Sweden and Norway, part of Scandinavia. It borders both the Baltic and North Seas along a 1,057-mile general coastline.

The northernmost point, not including Greenland and the Faroe Islands, is Skagen, the tip of Jutland, while the easternmost part is the island of Bornholm, located squarely in the West Baltic.



*Island of Bornholm. Photo: Colourbox.dk*

All of these islands are no farther than 32 miles from the general coastline, which consists of Jutland, Funen and Zealand. Jutland and these two main islands are all connected by bridges. Zealand is also connected to Sweden by bridge, forming the Oeresund region with Swedish urban centres such as Malmö.



Map of Denmark. RDDC.

The Danish straits consist of the three relatively shallow straits of the Great Belt, the Little Belt and Oeresund that connects the North Sea and the Baltic. Oeresund, the most direct connection, is at its narrowest point only three miles wide with a minimum depth of seven metres.

Denmark's land geography is characterised by flat, arable land interspersed with smaller forests.

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This geography stands in stark contrast to the Faroe Islands and Greenland, which are part of the Danish 'Commonwealth', literally translated into the Danish Realm Community. The Faroe Islands, midway between Denmark and Iceland, are a set of rocky and rugged islands of 540 square miles with a population of 48,700, a large fishing industry and a smaller pastoral sheep-herding culture. Greenland is a vast, Arctic area, consisting of 839,109 square miles and 55,000 inhabitants. It is the world's largest non-continental island, its capital Nuuk nestled on the south-western shoreline, and most of it covered by the Greenland ice sheet. All population centres are on the coast, with the population concentrated on the western coast.



*The Faroe Islands  
Photo: Colourbox.dk*



*Greenland  
Photo: Colourbox.dk*



### **History – From an early medieval empire to a modern small nation**

Denmark never had a period of empire before the middle ages and was never occupied by Rome. A trading and peasant culture developed into the Viking culture of Scandinavia around AD 800. A group of petty Viking kingdoms were merged into one during the 10<sup>th</sup> century, as the Vikings turned from raiding on the fringes, and sometimes centres, of early western Christendom to conquest. The Danes created some of the first urban centres in Ireland – Limerick, Cork and Dublin – and led several wars of conquest against the Christian English kings.

In 960 the famous Danish king Harald Bluetooth was christianised along with many of his subjects, partly in order to avoid future invasion and colonisation by Christian Germanic princes. It was during the Viking Age that Denmark reached its greatest extent, occupying most of England and part of Scotland along with Norway and the neighbouring parts of present-day Sweden.



*Colourbox.dk*

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In the 13<sup>th</sup> century England had been lost, but Denmark led a Scandinavia more or less united under one queen, Queen Margrethe I (Margaret), in the Union of Kalmar of 1397, with Copenhagen as the capital.

The next couple of centuries were defined by Swedish rebellion and wars between Sweden and Denmark. After the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Denmark became Lutheran following a civil war and several conflicts, which were replaced by more Swedish-Danish wars in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, where Denmark lost much territory.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century was a relatively peaceful one for Denmark, despite the many wars between the major powers of Europe. The conflicts of ascendant post-revolutionary France with England and Germany finally hit neutral Denmark in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where the British Admiral Lord Nelson and his fleet attacked Copenhagen. The British created what has been termed the first terror bombardment of a civilian population in history, burning down most of Copenhagen. The goal was to force a surrender of the neutral Danish fleet, so it would not be appropriated by French land troops, and Nelson succeeded.

Some 60 years later Denmark lost a war with Prussia and Austria, who occupied Jutland after a bloody siege of the Danish southern border fortification of Dybboel, often used as a symbol of patriotism today. Again, the Danish territory was reduced, and Denmark would not regain territory until after WWI, where the country was reunited with its southern frontier in Jutland.



*Dybboel. Colurbox.dk*

After WWII and a German occupation, Denmark experienced a period of continuous economic prosperity, where the welfare state model that defines Denmark internationally and Nordic countries in general was developed. In this period of almost full employment Danish agriculture was mechanised, and Danish industry and sea-faring trade developed considerably.

The result today is a modern society with a free, open market and a high level of general education, where Danes typically focus their leisure time on the pursuit of

'hygge' (translated at the closest as a kind of cosy feeling of safety and pleasantness in the company of a few, close friends).

After the turn of the millennium Denmark has, in a Danish perspective, led a very activist foreign and security policy in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Gulf of Aden and several other places, and said policy has received considerable public support.

### **Religion – The people's church**

The majority of the Danish population, 77 per cent, are members of the **Church of Denmark**, literally translated to the Danish people's church. It is a state church in both Denmark and Greenland of the Evangelical Lutheran denomination. Interestingly, the Danish Lutheran church has maintained its episcopate after the Reformation, with 10 bishops in Denmark in total, although no archbishops. Danish citizens are to a wide extent baptised and included in the church at birth, although you can renounce your membership afterwards.

The preliminary impression of an all-encompassing state church into which Danish citizens are born is not matched by reality, though. **Danes are in general a secular population**, and only about two-three per cent of the population regularly attend services, though more than one third of the population attend church on Christmas Eve. This does not prevent the majority of Danes from using their state church as an instrument for traditions such as confirmation, baptism, funerals and weddings. In essence, Lutheran state religion in Denmark represents a sort of cultural Christianity that Danes, on the one hand, do not take that seriously, but, on the other hand, find practically indispensable in the exercise of formal traditions. Moreover, 24 per cent of Danes consider themselves atheist, while 28 per cent believe there is a God, and 47 per cent think there is some sort of spirit or life force, a typical pattern for cultural Christian societies.

In addition to Christianity, of which there also are some Catholics, and a few sects such as the Neopagans (essentially followers of Ásatrú, the Viking mythology) etc., the **two other main religions are Judaism and Islam**.



Christiansborg. Colourbox.dk

Denmark's **Muslim population** makes up about 3,7 per cent of the population, representing the largest minority religion, the majority of the Muslim minority being Sunni, with minorities from the Bahá'í Shia denominations. The Muslim minority is the consequence of a relatively open migration policy practised in Denmark until the beginning of the millennium.

Denmark's **Jewish population** consists of approximately 10,000 people, with three synagogues located in Copenhagen. A Jewish diaspora has existed since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when Danish monarchs allowed them entry and free religious practice. During WWII the Danish Resistance helped many Jews flee to Sweden across Oeresund, most famously in 1943 on the eve of an order from the Nazi German governor to inter all Jews in Denmark.

### **Politics – Welfare**

The Danish parliamentary system is a constitutional monarchy, where Queen Margrethe II is the head of government with no de facto political power. Power lies in parliament, where a prime minister leads a typically coalitional government in the face of several opposition parties.

In modern times government has traditionally been led by either the Social Democrats, the Conservatives or the Danish Liberal Party.

The **Danish welfare state is very big, and Denmark has been labelled the 'Happy DDR' by some.** While the average income tax is not very high, 15<sup>th</sup> in Europe, the progressive tax system is arguably quite aggressive, where some individuals in the top bracket can pay around 60 per cent in income taxes. At the same time, though,

Danish and international business thrives in Denmark, since Danish corporate and business taxes are some of the lowest in Europe.

This, of course, leads to considerable debate about the appropriateness of taxing the working population of Denmark intensively, while Denmark has some trouble with 'structural' unemployment, meaning unemployed who remain on comparatively large public income transfers for considerable periods of time. This issue permeates most debates about welfare spending.

**Internationally, Denmark is a firm NATO partner** having participated with unit constellations in many UN and NATO operations. Danes have contributed soldiers to the frontlines in some of the most difficult regions in both Afghanistan's Helmand province and the Anbar region in Iraq, especially Basra, as well as Air Force and Navy assets to most of the bombing and patrolling missions since the beginning of the new millennium.



In the EU **Denmark remains a relatively firm supporter of further EU integration**, despite a large, EU-critical group in the population. It retains its own currency, but it has been, is and will most probably remain pegged to the Euro exchange rate.

**Business-wise, Denmark retains significant interest from foreign investors**, and the country has often topped Forbes and other business rankings as one of the best countries to do business in, because of its non-bureaucratic business climate and highly educated labour force with very competitive rates of hourly productivity.

**Denmark's main trading partners are Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom**, and the country's main trading partner outside the EU is the United States, while China also plays a significant role.

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### Useful links

<http://denmark.dk/> – The official website for Denmark.

<http://www.expatinDenmark.com/> – The official network for expat professionals in Denmark.

<http://www.howtoliveindenmark.com/> – A humorous guide for those who want to learn more about Danish culture and its peculiarities.

<http://cms.polsci.ku.dk/english/> – The Centre for Military Studies is a think tank at the University of Copenhagen, which services the Danish authorities with high-quality security and foreign policy analyses. Their reports, many of them made in cooperation with international partners, are in English and can be downloaded here.

[forsvaret.dk/fak/eng/](http://forsvaret.dk/fak/eng/) – The Royal Danish Defence College, where primarily services-focussed analysis is performed. For any questions or networking/connecting, this is the place to start for referral.



## **Institute for Languages and Cultures**

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