

Opinion – Denmark’s Procurement of Israeli Guns Has Not Been a Smooth Ride

Written by Harry Thompson

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HARRY THOMPSON, SEP 23 2023

Signed, sealed and delivered. Or so thought then Danish Defence Minister Jakob Elleman-Jensen when he helped push through a deal with Israeli arms manufacturer Elbit Systems for 19 ATMOS artillery systems at the end of January. But, thanks to the perseverance of Danish journalists at Altinget, a number of irregularities in the deal were brought to light, leading to a ministerial reshuffle in mid-August and continuing political turmoil for the coalition government. Now, several parties are saying it is no longer sufficient to simply investigate Elleman-Jensen, but carry out a full inquiry into the actions of the Executive and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the beginning of September, the new Danish Minister of Defence, Troels Lund Poulsen, was put before both the Finance Committee and the Defence Committee of the Danish parliament (the *Folketing*) to answer questions from parties regarding the arms deal with Israeli arms manufacturer Elbit Systems, which has caused some political strife for the coalition government.

The deal, which was signed at the end of January and was worth DKK 1.7 billion, was meant to provide quick relief to the Danish Army by providing it with 19 ATMOS artillery pieces to replace its battalion of CAESAR self-propelled howitzers which were heading to Ukraine to assist the AFU in its defence against Russian aggression. So what had changed? An investigation by the Danish publication Altinget added fuel to the fire, as it revealed that then Minister of Defence, Jakob Elleman-Jensen (now Minister of Economy) provided parliament with false information regarding the urgency of Elbit’s proposition, throwing a number of political, procedural and moral questions into the public domain.

Why was the Ministry so keen for Elbit to win the contract, while other tenders (France’s Nexter and Korea’s Hanwha) were given little to no consideration? Why was there such a rush to push through the deal? Why was Elbit’s offer declared to be the best if there were no other offers to compare it to? Why was all this misleading information allowed to be passed onto the *Folketing*?

The Israeli deadline was much longer than Ellemann-Jensen had suggested (he pressured the Defence Committee to make a decision before the end of January, when in fact the Israeli offer expired at the end of June, like the French and Korean competitors). And as Altinget’s mapping shows, it seems that the Israelis had closer contact with the Danish Armed Forces than was accorded to their competitors for the million-dollar order, so much so that the Danish Parliament was convinced in late January to say yes to the ATMOS order. Altinget managed to get hold of some of the documents provided by the Ministry of Defence that tried to underline the urgent nature of the Elbit deal. One of the documents read:

The file is urgent, as the contract with the supplier must be signed as soon as possible and before the end of January to ensure the validity of the offer, production possibilities and a rapid rebuilding of the operational capacity.

It is important to note that Elbit Systems and the Danish Defence Materiel and Procurement Agency (FMI) were working on a deal as far back as 2015, when the Danish Ministry of Defence tested the ATMOS system, but the Danish left, notably the Radikale Venstre and SF, were seriously opposed to the deal due to Elbit’s questionable human rights record and it was cancelled. This led to litigation, which is ongoing and for some is a direct reason for the problematic approach taken by the FMI and the Ministry of Defence in January. FMI Deputy Director Christian

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Brejner Ishøj was involved in both affairs, and curiously found himself on a visit to Israel from 8 to 10 January, during which he “obtained weapons tenders from Elbit Systems, helped recommend a direct award of the Danish billion-dollar order to Elbit Systems and reached a settlement with the company”, according to Altinget.

Two hours before the Finance Committee's meeting on Thursday 26 January at 13:00, the committee members received two confidential documents signed by Jakob Ellemann-Jensen, totalling seven pages, on the purchase of ATMOS artillery systems and PULS rocket launchers for the Danish Army for a total of DKK 1.74 billion. “It is a decision-making committee where we decide things that involve billions of kroner. We are very directly responsible. Therefore, we must have proper working conditions,” said Enhedslisten’s finance spokesman, Pelle Dragsted at the time. As it turned out, there was no hurry, and Elleman-Jensen had provided the committee with false information. Nexter, Hanwha and Lockheed, competitors to the Israeli tender, have expressed their outrage at the procedural irregularities.

Rasmus Jarlov, spokesperson for the Danish Conservatives said:

I can’t believe that the rest of the members of the Finance Committee accept such a way of working, because it shows that they don’t take their own work seriously. That they put up with such poor conditions that they don’t have time to read things and don’t have time to talk to anyone about it.

Many have even questioned the loyalty of certain actors within the Ministry of Defence, whose actions implicitly suggest favouritism with regards to the Israeli firm. The case has so far led to the Ministry of Defense’s Permanent Secretary being transferred, the practical demotion of Elleman-Jensen and an independent legal investigation of the process being launched.

Hitherto, it was assumed that the main driver of the deal was Elleman-Jensen, with little involvement of other top officials in the coalition government. But on September 11, Altinget revealed that a number of top government officials were involved, proven by a cache of internal emails that the publication gained access to, which focus on the donation of the CAESARs to Ukraine and the subsequent purchase of the replacement weapons from Elbit Systems.

The political impact of the affair seems to be expanding further. The new information shows, among other things, that the actual case of donation and acquisition of replacement weapons was dealt with at meetings with the participation of the Prime Ministry and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It also shows that a large number of emails regarding the matter passed between the two ministries and the Ministry of Defense in the weeks leading up to the controversial weapons purchase. Jørgen Grønnegaard Christensen, Professor of Political Science at Aarhus University, has closely studied the list, which, according to him, shows that “it is a more complex case than that, because it may appear that time pressure was applied from the very top”. This information implicates Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen and Foreign Minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen. They are yet to make public their position on the matter, but Danish politics should certainly strap itself in for a bumpy ride over the next weeks and months.

About the author:

Harry Thompson is a senior international trade consultant. He is involved in a number of sensitive issues that have sharpened his passion for international relations and geopolitics.