

## Foreign interference? Evidence points at US and Israeli meddling in Danish circumcision debate

Today the proposal of a ban on ritual circumcision of boys under the age of 18 will again be considered in parliament – and rejected



It's not like she's said anything this time (photo: Mette Frederiksen/Facebook)

*April 20th, 2021 6:22 pm | by Lena Hunter*

The proposal to ban circumcision of boys under 18 is up for discussion in Parliament for the second time today. [But PM Mette Frederiksen has already made her position clear.](#)

“A ban is not the right way,” she declared in September last year, following a majority vote not to support the ban.

It was a notable contrast to her previous stance: “I don’t believe that religion can legitimize inflicting physical defects on one’s children,” she said to Kristeligt Dagblad in 2008.

Now, DR Nyheder has gained access to documents that shed light on the lead up to Mette Frederiksen’s decision. It’s wasn’t just a question of domestic policy, but of international relations.

Particularly, it has become apparent, [with the US and Israel.](#)

**[READ ALSO: Denmark refuses to ban the ritual circumcision of boys](#)**

### **An inappropriate question?**

In 2018, Intact Denmark – an organisation working to eradicate ritual circumcision – submitted a petition to parliament outlining arguments in favour of a child circumcision age limit.

This earned them a mysterious invitation to a meeting with the American embassy where, according to Intact, two representatives asked: “What would it take for you to withdraw your petition?”

Lena Nyhus, chair of Intact, condemned the interference as inappropriate. “It’s extremely undemocratic of the USA or any other country to interfere in Danish domestic politics,” [she said.](#)

## [READ ALSO: Botched ritual circumcisions behind dozens of hospitalisations every year](#)

### **Tip of the iceberg**

But it turns out this was just the start of an international campaign of influence on Danish policymakers during 2018.

According to a report from the Danish embassy in Washington, Democratic Majority Leader Steny Hoyer and delegates from both the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations (CoP) paid a visit to press the ambassador on the progress of the proposal and its traction amongst the Danish public.

Another report, this time from the US Police Intelligence Service, revealed: “The World Jewish Congress has appeared before official Danish representatives to argue that a ban would threaten the existence of Jewish society in Denmark.”

### **Israeli involvement**

There’s evidence too that Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu was interested in the outcome of the proposal.

Though discussions between Frederiksen and Netanyahu were closely guarded, the Danish PM tellingly requested a meeting with Netanyahu shortly after rejecting the ban, in which she told him of the outcome.

Later, Frederiksen [spearheaded a controversial vaccine alliance between Denmark and Israel](#) that sparked criticism in Europe.



Frederiksen with Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel last year.

New evidence points to US and Israeli pressure in the Danish circumcision debate. (photo: Facebook/Mette Frederiksen)

### **Meddling or just free speech?**

“It’s quite unique, at least in my area, that foreign governments are so interested in a bill in Denmark,” remarked religion researcher Brian Arly Jacobsen from the University of Copenhagen.

The level of foreign interest is undeniably unusual. Many politicians have condemned it as meddling.

Liberal Alliance group chairman Ole Birk Olesen commented “it’s crossing a line in terms of what good alliance partners do to each other.”

Peter Hvelplund, chairman of Enhedslisten, called it ‘unacceptable’, and said “these are internal Danish affairs – not something that other powers have the right to interfere in.”

Socialistisk Folkeparti’s legal spokesperson Karina Lorentzen agreed. “I think it is overwhelming and a little surprising that such pressure is being put on. For us, it is just about children’s right to their own body and deciding for themselves what should happen to it.”

### **“A double standard”**

However, not all politicians are up in arms: “It doesn’t surprise me that the American Embassy, which represents the US government, is trying to lobby Denmark in this case. We also do that from the Danish side, so I honestly think it’s a double standard,” said Venstre group chairman, Karsten Lauritzen.

The interim US Ambassador to Denmark, Stuart Dwyer, defended his fellow US representatives, commenting “Diplomacy is about engaging in a wide range of topics, so I see it as a normal diplomatic commitment.”

Andrew Baker, director of AJC, was also quick to sidestep any accusations of manipulation. “[Our contact with the Danish government] was to explain that it was a case that worried us and a topic that had our attention.”

Justice Minister, Nick Hækkerup, spoke on behalf of the government: “It is almost impossible to find cases where outside interest groups do not try to influence what the government thinks. The crucial thing is how we take in and respond to the views.”

### **More than a domestic matter**

With many voices clamoring to sway the circumcision debate, the government had to weigh Danish domestic opinion against foreign policy implications.

Ultimately, foreign policy implications won out.

“Frankly, I myself have a hard time with circumcision. That is why I have previously been in favour of a circumcision ban,” explained Frederiksen to Berlingske in 2020.

“Fortunately, I’ve dared to change my position. I know what the millennium-old ritual means for religious minorities in Denmark. And I know that some Danish Jews will no longer be able to see themselves in our society if a ban is implemented.”

Liberal Party chairman, Jacob Ellemann-Jensen, was quick to support the PM. “We must be able to accommodate the Jewish community in Denmark – we owe it to them.”

“The consequences, if Denmark is the first country in the world to make a ban, are too big for me and the Liberal Party to proceed,” conceded Lauritzen.

“It is not the same as supporting the act of circumcision, because we do not”

### **The debate rages on**

Despite the government’s decision, a [recent poll by Epinion](#) showed that 73 percent of Danes believe a ban on ritual circumcision of boys under the age of 18 should be introduced.

Only 10 percent responded that they were against a ban.

The PM's u-turn gets to core of the circumcision debate – it's a thorny intersection of body politics and cultural politics.

Far from settling the debate, the emergence of more information on the Danish policy is fueling a divide between public and political opinion.