

natural advantages. If anything, it's the reverse: Syria is part of the fertile crescent that was once the birthplace of human civilisation; Denmark is a bleak northern outpost with few natural resources of its own. Denmark is full of nice things, but not many of them grow out of the ground. (The restaurants that have made Denmark's gastronomic reputation specialise in local produce, but they transform it with the aid of modern technology; no one would pay those prices for what the Danish soil produces on its own.)

The difference between Denmark and Syria is politics. Politics has helped make Denmark what it is. And politics has helped make Syria what it is.

To say that politics makes the difference is not to say that politics is responsible for everything good that happens in one place and everything bad that happens somewhere else. Danes aren't happy because their politics make them happy: politicians seem to annoy and aggrieve the Danes just as much as they do people everywhere. Danish politicians can take some of the credit for their social security or transport systems, but they can hardly claim to be the ones who made the restaurants world-beaters or the design so desirable. Likewise, Syria's current politicians are to blame for plenty of the misery stalking their country, but they didn't invent the religious and ethnic divisions that are behind so much of the violence. The civil war has pitted Sunni against Shia; it is being fuelled by deep differences of culture and history; it was triggered by the chance effects of recession and drought. Politics doesn't create all human passions or hatreds. Nor is politics responsible for every natural

disaster or economic set-back that takes place. But it either amplifies them or it moderates them. That's the difference it makes.

Denmark today looks like a country that enjoys political stability because its people have nothing serious to fight about. Danes might be antsy about immigration, like many Europeans. But, compared with Syria, there exist none of the ethnic or cultural fissures that would provoke a civil war. As well as being peaceful and prosperous, Denmark is also a broadly secular society: religion doesn't overshadow public life, even though it does occasionally intrude. But Denmark wasn't always like this. Five hundred years ago it was more like Syria: a fragile, tempestuous, hard-scrabble place, shot through with religious conflict and violent disagreements. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Denmark, like the rest of Europe, was regularly tearing itself apart, you would have been hard pressed to know whether it was better to live there or in Syria. Life was cheap everywhere. If anything, Denmark was the really dangerous place to be, because of the endless spill-over of conflict with its Scandinavian neighbours. For most of its history Denmark stood at the crossroads for war in Europe. Syria's borders today are an arbitrary construct, imposed on the country by victorious rival powers. But so too are Denmark's.

Yet, despite this, Denmark has made the transition from war to peace, and from a subsistence economy to a wealthy one. It did so by arriving at the social and political institutions that enabled its people to co-exist peacefully with each other and with their neighbours. How this happened is not easy to explain. The puzzle is that good politics