

## ‘Diaspora is Korea’s driving force and strategic asset’

Lessons for Korea from Israel’s youth policy; ‘organic inter-ministry collaboration is essential’

“Israel views its diaspora not merely as immigrants but as a core strategic asset for national development. Korea also needs to strategically redesign its policies for overseas Korean youth.”

Lee Kang-geun (61), president of the Korean Association in Israel (director of the Jerusalem Institute for Jewish Studies), stated this during an interview with Yonhap News on Oct. 1 at the Grand Walkerhill Hotel in Seoul, where the 2025 World Korean Association Conference hosted by the Overseas Koreans Agency (Commissioner Kim Kyung-hyup) was being held. He introduced Israel’s case of elevating youth diaspora policy to a national-level strategy.

“Israel has established a comprehensive structure where four agencies -- the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Immigration, the Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organization (WZO) -- closely collaborate. This structure connects identity education, short- and long-term homeland visit programs, return (‘aliyah’) and settlement support in a step-by-step manner,” Lee said.

Lee stated that the implications of Israel’s policy for Korea are clear. He first emphasized, “Identity must be elevated beyond mere cultural education to a national development strategy.”

### ‘Youth visits to their homeland should be developed into path to return’

Just as Israel designed a flow connecting Zionist education, visits and return, Korea must also develop its overseas youth homeland visit programs into a structure that progresses from maintaining identity to participation and contribution, and ultimately to return.

“Organic collaboration between ministries is essential,” he further pointed out, explaining that while education, diplomacy and settlement support are currently fragmented in Korea, they must be integrated into a single system for overseas Korean policies to gain traction.

He also stressed the importance of sustaining a global network after homeland visits.

“Israel doesn’t stop at just a homeland visit program; it maintains a youth community afterward. Korea also needs institutional support to connect overseas youth with domestic youth, leading to internships or startup opportunities,” Lee said.



Lee Kang-geun, president of the Korean Association in Israel

He also highlighted the necessity of reverse leadership dispatch.

“Like Israel’s ‘shlichim,’ Korea should dispatch young leaders to overseas Korean language schools and Korean community organizations to directly lead identity education. This experience serves as leadership training for the youth and provides significant support to local communities.”

### Cooperating with Korean Association for evacuation during Israel-Iran War

Lee also shared his experience personally directing the evacuation of Korean residents during the Israel-Iran War last June, emphasizing: “In the face of crisis, the Korean people united as one to protect each other. The war began at a moment no one anticipated. One thing was clear then: We had to protect each other.”

Lee recalled the urgent evacuation process led by the Korean Association at the time.

Following Israel’s airstrikes on Iran on June 13, Iran and pro-

Korean nationals are evacuated to Egypt during the Israel-Iran conflict last June.



Iranian armed groups launched missile counterattacks, plunging all of Israel into a wartime situation. As air raid sirens sounded in major cities like Jerusalem and Tel Aviv and missile alerts intensified, the Korean community of about 800 people also had to urgently prepare evacuation measures.

### 'Emergency evacuation operation' to Jordan and Egypt

"We judged that the situation was deteriorating rapidly, making an airport escape impossible," Lee said. "The Korean Association had no choice but to directly take charge of directing the evacuation of our compatriots." The association promptly devised an emergency evacuation plan via land routes and, in cooperation with the Korean Embassy in Israel, first established a route through neighboring Jordan.

The first evacuation began June 15, with six people, including the elderly, the infirm and children, bypassing areas near the Syrian border and moving to Amman, the capital of Jordan. Subsequently, on June 16, a second group of 23 people arrived in Jordan. As the situation worsened, the Korean Association expanded the route to include Cairo, Egypt, and on June 23, 43 expatriates escaped via the Taba border crossing.

"The overland journey was a grueling route lasting over 16 hours. We had to halt due to air raid alerts, but we couldn't give up."

For the evacuation convoy, the association prepared boxed meals, bottled water and emergency medicine at dawn.

"At 4 a.m., we prepared boxed meals with fellow expatriates and embarked on a long journey. When we crossed the border and arrived in Cairo, the Egyptian Korean Association provided warm meals and homestays, and the embassy also offered active assistance. I was deeply moved by the solidarity of the Korean people across borders."

The Korean Associations in Jordan and Egypt urgently activated a homestay-style evacuation shelter system, while Korean churches, including Myeongseong Church, supported evacuation costs. The Korean Embassy in Israel also coordinated with the embassies in Jordan and Egypt to secure border crossing permits and vehicle support.

### Korean Associations unite to launch Levant Korean Federation

"When we crossed the border, local Koreans reached out to us, saying, 'You're safe now.' This would have been impossible without Korean solidarity," Lee said.

He emphasized that this evacuation underscored the urgent need for cooperation among regional Korean associations, announcing the launch of a new international cooperative body.

"The cooperation shown by Korean associations across nations during the war was nothing short of miraculous. We couldn't let this be a one-time event."

From Sept. 2 to 4, Korean associations from five countries -- Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel and Egypt -- gathered in Dahab, Egypt, to establish the Levant Korean Federation. Lee, president of the Korean Association in Israel, was appointed as its inaugural president.

This federation is a permanent rescue network that shares information on Korean nationals in Middle Eastern conflict zones, establishes joint safety measures, and activates evacuation, relief and communication systems during crises.

"In regions where war and terrorism risks are a daily reality, information exchange and joint response among Korean associations are not optional but essential," Lee said. [장]



Presidents of Korean associations affiliated with the Levant Korean Federation pose for a photo. From Sept. 2-4, Korean associations from five countries -- Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel and Egypt -- gathered in Dahab, Egypt, to establish the Levant Korean Federation. Lee Kang-geun was appointed as its inaugural president.