

Islam And South Korea's Middle East Diplomacy

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Abstract

Islam was reintroduced into South Korea during the Korean War due to the participation of the Turkish army. In its more than 50 years' development process, the achievements of Korean Islam include the establishment of legal Islamic organizations, the construction of mosques all over the country, pilgrimage to Mecca, translation of the *Koran* into Korean, and the establishment of an Islamic Institute. The number of Muslims in South Korea has grown considerably. South Korea's Middle East diplomacy began in 1957; its spheres include economic diplomacy, international contribution diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy. South Korea has gained a certain level of influence in the Middle East. South Korea's Islamic communities take part in the government's Middle East diplomacy at various levels, and this is a powerful supplement to official Middle East diplomacy.

Key Words: South Korea; Islam; Middle East; Diplomacy; Turkey

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Since the 1970s, with the rapid development of the economy, South Korea has been among Four Asian Tigers. Its successful democratic transition in the 1980s has laid solid foundations for its economic and social development. As a marginalized small country in Asia, South Korea not only has traditional cultures, but also embraces religions and civilizations from all over the world. Its openness can be reflected on its full-range diplomacy, not only in Asia, but in the whole world. Guided by such inclusive and open spirit, Islam has once again appeared in South Korea and begun to take shape. South Korea's influence can also be found in the Middle East. Moreover, development of Islam in South Korea has played a role in its diplomacy toward the Middle East.

The Development of Islam in Modern South Korea

Islam was introduced to South Korea under the Silla Dynasty. With the changing times and the influence of various powers, the role of Islam became increasingly small and finally vanished under the Chosun Dynasty. Islam's reentering to modern South Korea was no accident; it was due to the breakout of the Korean War in 1950.¹ With the expansion of the war, 90% of South Korea was rapidly occupied by North Korea, and the United Nations (UN) authorized UN troops to fight back. Besides South Korea's own forces, Turkey sent Brigades, the number of which was surpassed only by US troops. Some religious people were enrolled in the Turkish Brigades. Zubeyr Koch and Abdul Rahman, brothers among the soldiers in the Turkish Brigades, established a mobile house with the semicircular arch as a Mosque and spread Islam to the local people. Besides the value of Islam, the wounds left by the war was another reason for the South Korean people to convert to Islam. With strong interest, many South Korean people gathered around the Turkish Imams.²

In this process, the freedom of beliefs in South Korea provided guarantees to Islam's spread. Although Christianity is still developing rapidly in South Korea, evidenced by South Korea's first president's swearing on the Bible, this has not had a negative impact on Islam's continued expansion in the country. According to Article 20 of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea, "All citizens shall enjoy freedom of religion," and "No state religion shall be recognized, and church and state shall be separated."³ Influenced by these multiple factors, the first generation of Muslims has been formed, constituted by Muslim converts in the northeastern part of China after World War II and new Muslims influenced by Turkish Imams.

In 1955, for the Korea Islamic Society (한국이슬람교협회), KIS, was established as the first Islamic organization in South Korea. Almarhum Muhammad Umar Kim Jin Kyu was elected as

the first president of KIS. Islamic groups in South Korea began to carry out international religious communications. Many Muslims in South Korea visit Islamic countries; some went to study at the International Islamic University in Malaysia. The Malaysian government has donated \$33,000 to help Muslims in South Korea to build a *masjid* (mosque) in 1963. Unfortunately, the construction of the *masjid* could not be completed due to various reasons, among which inflation figured prominently.⁴ With the increase of Muslims in South Korea and the improving of the organizational functions, Muslims in South Korea established the Korea Muslim Federation (KMF, 한국이슬람교중앙연합회) in 1965 and the Korea Islamic Foundation (KIF, 재단법인 한국이슬람교) in 1967. The Korea Muslim Federation was constituted of KMF and the Korea Institute for Islamic Culture. The KMF includes organizations for the youth, students, women and the elderly people.⁵

KMF has made great contributions to Islam's spreading in South Korea. It has translated the *Quran* to Korean, taught Arabic and Islamic culture in South Korea, sent South Korean students to Islamic countries, carried out relief to the poor, and published pamphlets such as the *Korea Islam Herald* (코리아이슬람헤럴드), the *Muslim Weekly Newsletter* (주간무슬림), and the *Al-Islam*. The *Quran* is the holiest book of Islam; hence, it is of great significance to translate it into Korean to Muslims in South Korea. This work has lasted for centuries, and has not been published until 2005 when the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY, 세계무슬림청년협의회), located in Saudi Arabia, helped the KMF in completing the last 10 chapters. They have printed 1,000 copies, and intend to print another 4,000. The printed copies were distributed to Islamic Centers and Muslims in South Korea.⁶ The *Korea Islam Herald* was first published in June 1967, and after years of suspension, was reopened on August 15, 2005 with the aim of publicizing activities of South Korean Muslims and understanding the rights of Muslims. In April 2008, the KMF and the Organization of the Islamic Conference jointly held the first Asian Muslims international conference, which lasted for 3 days in Seoul, with the goal of improving the situation of Muslims in non-Islamic countries.

The KMF has a very close relationship with the World Assembly of Muslim Youth. They participate in the activities held by each other. On August 8–9, 2009, an Islamic Special Toastmasters (이슬람특별강연회) was co-held by KMF, sponsored by the World Assembly of Muslim Youth in the conference room of the Seoul Central Mosque, covering the topics of Islamic culture, catechism, and stories on the wife of the Prophet.⁷

With the support of President Park Chung-hee and funds from Saudi Arabia and other Islamic countries, the biggest Mosque in South Korea, the Seoul Central Mosque, was officially opened on May 21, 1976. In the next decades, 10 Mosques or Islamic centers have been built in the Gyeonggi Province, North Jeolla Province, North Gyeongsang Province, South Gyeongsang

Province and Jeju Province in South Korea, named Paju Seongwon (파주성원), Bupyeong Seongwon (부평성원), Ansan Seongwon (안산성원), Anyang Seongwon (안양성원), Gyeonggi Gwangju Seongwon (경기광주성원), Jeonnam Gwangju Seongwon (전남광주성원), Pocheon Seongwon (포천성원), Jeonju Seongwon (전주성원), Gimpo Seongwon (김포성원), Daegu Seongwon (대구성원), Changwon Seongwon (창원성원), Busan Seongwon (부산성원), Daejeon Seongwon (대전성원), and Jeju Seongwon (제주성원).⁸ In short, mosques are obviously not limited to the Seoul metropolitan region, and Islam is therefore part of daily exposure in many communities.

After the establishment of the Muslim organizations and mosques in South Korea, Hajj, one of the five Pillars of Islam, has also been achieved.⁹ In 1960, Muslims in South Korea performed the Hajj to the holy lands of Mecca and Medina for the first time. In 1978, the Hajj delegation had 130 Muslims, marking the biggest Hajj delegation ever in South Korea's history. A report published by *Arab News* in 1991 stated that among all religions in South Korea, Islam was developing fastest.¹⁰

Abdul Rahim Shin and Hussain Yu Chang Sik, two leaders of South Korean Muslims, actively promoted the development of Islam in South Korea. They showed the devotion and modesty of Muslims in South Korea. They said that "We are happy to be here at the invitation of the Muslim World League. The facilities are superb and the Saudi government under the leadership of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Fahd has provided consummate services to the guests of God."¹¹

In 2002, the Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs approved the establishment of the Korea Middle East Association (KOMEA) jointly formed by South Korea Muslims and scholars on Middle East and Islamic studies. The association aims the study of Islam, Korean culture and the promotion of communication with the Islamic world. After establishing many Mosques and the Hajj, the first Islamic school was opened in March 2009 in South Korea. It enrolls both Muslim and non-Muslim students. Islamic courses there were taught in Arabic and the rest of the courses in English. There is a mosque in the institute for students to pray. Abdullah Al-Aifan, Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to Seoul, delivered \$500,000 to KMF in 2008 on behalf of the Saudi Arabian government. For this reason, the school was named "Prince Sultan Bin Abdul Aziz Elementary School". "One of our goals is delivering correct and unbiased information about Islam to not only children but also the general public. Of course, the school will serve as a mission," KMF Secretary General Kim Hwan-yoon said.¹²

As of 2002, the number of Muslims in South Korea was estimated at about 45,000, in addition to some 100,000 foreign workers from Muslim-majority countries.¹³ The *Korea Islam Herald*

detailed records of the names, gender, ages, and nationalities of the 80 people who converted to Islam in 2006 in South Korea. Some 37 people among them are males and 43 females; 71 of them are South Korean and nine are not; three of them are from the US, and there are one Russian, one Vietnamese, one Canadian, one Pakistan, one Filipino, and one Indonesian. Among these 80 people, the oldest is 61 years old and the youngest is 12 years old.¹⁴ Up to the end of 2007, the number of Muslims in South Korea remains at about 14,000.¹⁵

Since 1955, Islam emerged, developed, and transformed from a private voluntary organization to a registered legal religion. Mosques have developed steadily and Islamic education has improved, sending students abroad and establishing schools. Results have also been achieved in translating the *Koran* to Korean, completing the Hajj, and holding international Islamic conferences. For the first time, South Korea's Islamic development has direct communication with foreign Muslims and Islamic countries without the participation or guidance from the government. This process can be viewed as a development dominated by independent civil forces. Islam could be accepted by South Koreans because "Islamic civilization usually respects the rights of others and freedom and has a positive attitude toward others," said Dr. Lee Hee-soo, and he believes that "the principles and basic thought of Islam are in many parts parallel with the Korean value system."¹⁶ Nonetheless, Islam's role in South Korea remains limited. "On the whole, Islam in Korea is not that relevant, despite the efforts of Muslim preachers. It is considered to be an exotic phenomenon, although the number of Korean Muslims is much larger than the number of Orthodox Koreans."¹⁷

South Korea's Foreign Policy in the Middle East

Due to the friendship during the Korean War, South Korea established diplomatic relations with Turkey in 1957 and later launched its Middle East diplomacy. By 2002, South Korea has established diplomatic ties with all Middle East countries, except with Palestine and Syria, but it did set up offices in Palestine in 2005. In his speech, titled, "Together We Shall Open a Road to Advancement" delivered by South Korea's former president Lee Myung-bak during his inaugural ceremony in Seoul, he said, "There is a map of the Republic of Korea within each of us. I will take that map and expand it so that it reaches out to the world."¹⁸ He also mentioned three missions of the diplomacy of South Korea: first, as befitting our economic size and diplomatic capacity, South Korea's diplomacy would contribute to promoting and protecting universal values; second, Korea would actively participate in the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations as well as enlarge its official development assistance (ODA); third, by emphasizing the importance of cultural diplomacy, South Korea would work to allow Korea to communicate more openly and easily with the international community.¹⁹ Concurrently, Lee Myung-bak has summarized the fields of South Korean diplomacy: economic diplomacy, which focuses mainly on energy; international diplomacy; and cultural diplomacy. South Korea's interests and

cooperation activities in the Middle East in the previous decades can be reflected in these fields. Hence, undoubtedly, the Middle East figures in Lee Myung-bak's speech.

First, South Korea's economic diplomacy toward the Middle East can be mainly reflected in two areas: energy diplomacy and construction diplomacy. South Korea's energy diplomacy comes from its demands for oil and gas resources in the Middle East. South Korea is an emerging industrial country. Since the 1960s and the 1970s, its demands for oil have greatly increased. Since South Korea itself is not an oil-producing country, the Middle East, a region with rich oil resources, becomes the first choice for South Korea. Out of economic and security interests, oil plays an important role in the improvement of South Korea's relationship with Arab countries. South Korea currently is the 13th largest economy in the world, and its demand for oil resources is considerable.

Present day South Korea mainly gets oil through two methods: exploitation of oil in Middle Eastern countries and direct imports. In 1979, South Korea established the Korea National Oil Corporation (KNOC) for its oil demands. As of today, this corporation has signed agreements on oil exploitation with many Middle Eastern countries, such as Libya, Iraq, and Yemen. In 2007, NNOC's oil production in Libya amounted to 125,000 barrels per day. South Korea's investment in oil industries in the Middle East also promotes the changes in its own industrial structure. In the first half of 2008, its export of oil production ranked at the top of all export products, with \$18.348 billion. The refining industry in South Korea has shifted from an industry guided by domestic demands to becoming one of the world's biggest exporting industries.²⁰ Although South Korea tries to diversify the sources of its oil imports, the Middle East's importance is difficult to change. Due to the marking up of the international oil price, the Middle East replaced Japan in 2006 and became the biggest importing target of South Korea with the import volume \$30.76 billion.²¹ In May 2005, then South Korean president Roh Moo-hyun visited three Middle Eastern countries, including the United Arab Emirates, which is South Korea's second biggest oil importing country. In March 2007, Roh Moo-hyun visited Gulf oil producers, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar to carry out energy diplomacy. It was the first time throughout the country's history for South Korean presidents to visit Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in the past 27 years, and the first time to visit Qatar. Former South Korea president Lee Myung-bak called for energy diplomacy toward the Middle East and Africa. Under his administration, South Korea signed oil cooperation agreements with Iraq's Kurdish autonomous region.

Construction diplomacy refers to South Korea's contracted projects in the Middle East since the 1970s. The construction market overseas plays an important role in stimulating South Korea's economic growth. South Korea's contractors in the Middle East include Hyundai Engineering, GS E&C, and Doosan Heavy Industries & Construction. Every year, South Korea's amount of its

project contracts in the Middle East accounts for 65%–70% in the total amount. In 2005, South Korea's amount of its project contracts in the Middle East was as high as \$6.445 billion. South Korea's Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport which is responsible for the competent authorities of the projects, has sent officials to the Middle East to coordinate the investment and opening of the construction market there. It has also sent many construction and transportation counselors to be stationed in South Korean embassies in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, which is rare in diplomacy.²² From January–November 2006, the number of South Korea's contracted projects in the Middle East amounts to \$8.258 billion, accounting for 61.41% of the world, in which Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Jordan rank at the top three with 21, 4, and 2 projects worth \$3.322 billion, \$1.889 billion, and \$1.184 billion, respectively.²³

Energy diplomacy and construction diplomacy are just two aspects of South Korea's economic diplomacy toward the Middle East. The South Korean government has various economic exchanges with the Middle East countries. On July 8 and 9, 2009, the third round of the discussion on the Free Trade Area between South Korea and the Gulf Cooperation Council was held in Seoul, covering many fields, including goods, services, and investments. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) established a strategic partnership with South Korea in December 2009 with the import of nuclear power stations as an opportunity; that is, civilian nuclear energy cooperation as a precursor while taking into account other civilian economic cooperation fields, such as oil and gas development; and then stretched to military exchange, import of weapons and fighting together against piracy. Its long-term goals also include healthy cultural cooperation.²⁴

Second is South Korea's international contribution diplomacy. South Korea actively cooperated in the US-led Afghan War and in the Iraq War by sending troops to shoulder combat missions. Because the Afghan War was authorized by the UN, coupled with the fact that the Taliban regime is of an extremist nature and sheltered Al-Qaeda, it was not controversial for South Korea to send troops to Afghanistan. However, this was not the case in the Iraq War led by the US and the UK. It was controversial for South Korean troops to participate in the Iraq War, the number of which is preceded only by the armies of the US and UK.

Due to the 2007 South Korean hostage crisis in Afghanistan, South Korea began to withdraw its army in December 2007. With the increasingly stabilization of the situation in Iraq, the last South Korean troops were withdrawn on December 19, 2008—four years after their stationing in Iraq. The South Korean government tries to play a positive and active role in peace-making and security affairs on the stage. At the first stage of its establishment, South Korea has received aid from the international community, which laid solid foundations for its infrastructure construction and economic growth. South Korea has launched ODA in 1977 and established KOICA in 1991 as the specific implementing agency of the former.

In January 2007, the UN approved South Korea's request of sending UN peacekeepers to Lebanon. On June 21, 2007, UN peacekeepers in Lebanon sent by South Korea were formally established in Gwangju. On July 5, the advance team with about 60 peacekeeping soldiers arrived in Lebanon. On July 19, another 300 peacekeepers had also been sent to Lebanon. "Their main task will be guarding and patrolling the Tyre area in southern Lebanon, 30 kilometers north of the border with Israel, inspecting for weapons, smuggling, and hostile activities by the Hezbollah forces as part of the UN Interim Forces in Lebanon Command."²⁵

The benefit brought by ODA of South Korea has covered Iraq and Afghanistan, which suffered from the wars in the 21st century. In its assistance program to Iraq, South Korea received 100 Iraqi officials from the Iraqi Oil Ministry to attend 5 training courses, so as to protect the oil industry in Iraq. Through reforming the Calama Hospital and building the central employment-training center, South Korea helps in Iraq's infrastructure construction. South Korea also provided assistance to Iraq on drinking water and sewage treatment by providing tankers and garbage sweepers. Additionally, South Korea had given 3,500 personal computers to Baghdad and Erbil to help Iraq lay the foundations for its IT industry from 2003 to 2006. Between 2003–2007, about 2,400 officials from the Iraqi central or local governments have been trained in South Korea.²⁶ South Korea has sent many trainers and carried out similar programs to Afghanistan, especially with regard medical services. The Korean government announced in May 2009 that it would provide medical services to around 40,000 Afghans annually, or 150–200 a day.²⁷

Third is South Korea's cultural diplomacy in the Middle East. South Korea, which has long lived within the circle of Chinese civilization, actively received Western civilization while safeguarding its unique traditional cultural factors. With the development of South Korea's economy and its social diversity, international communication of this country covers not only ordinary economic, trade, and political interactions, but also cultural industries. Cultural communication has been an important tool in international exchanges. South Korean culture has generated a strong "Korean wave" (한류).²⁸ The Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism has a special department responsible for exporting South Korean culture to the whole world, including the Middle East. The department of international culture under the Arts Council Korea is the main executive agency in this regard.

The link between South Korea and the Middle East on culture is that South Korea shares a similar colonial experience with many Middle Eastern countries. Hence, its cultural diplomacy does not carry an image of cultural hegemony. Ambassador Lee Soon-chun from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade has pointed that "Culture is the spirit, a philosophy, and a part of life";

“Culture is an important vehicle for introducing our country to others”; “Our first and foremost task is to take our traditional culture and develop it further for wide introduction overseas”; “the government should provide support for private performing troupes”; and “the government should also support the introduction of popular Korean music, dramas and movies in other countries.”²⁹ The “Korean wave” promoted by South Korea TV can also be found in the Middle East. At the end of 2004, Korean television programme *Winter Sonata* (겨울연가) was broadcast in Egypt; in October 2005, *Poseidon* arrived in Turkey and its ratings ranked 32 out of 1,000 TV programs; *Winter Sonata* and *Emperor of the Sea* (해신) have also been shown in countries, such as Jordan, Tunisia, and Iraq; *Dae Jang Geum* (대장금) has been released in Iran.³⁰ South Korea’s diplomacy toward the Middle East has raised Middle Eastern people’s understanding of South Korea as well as enhanced South Korea’s national image.

In March 2009, former South Korean president Lee Myung-bak launched the “New Asia Initiative”. His “four powers diplomacy” has since expanded to the whole Asia, including the Middle East, covering full fields including culture, which greatly promotes South Korea’s cultural diplomacy toward the Middle East.

South Korean Islamic Groups’ Participation in ROK-Middle East Diplomacy

As indicated above, both Islam’s taking root in modern South Korea and South Korea’s Middle East diplomacy started in the 1950s, and both are closely related to Turkey. Such a relationship is worth noticing. With increasing interactions between South Korea and the Middle East, more questions and challenges for Islam and the Middle East will rise in South Korea. Against such a background, Islam’s participation in South Korea’s Middle East diplomacy is precious.

First, Islamic groups in South Korea participate in the country’s economic diplomacy and international contribution diplomacy. They train the South Korean workers and technical staff members through labor exportation, as well as through the Muslims among South Korea soldiers. They also actively provide aid to Islamic countries.

With respect to South Korea’s economic diplomacy, many South Korean workers have been expatriated to serve in the energy companies and construction projects in the Middle East. Since the 1970s, many South Koreans have been to the Middle East to engage in construction projects. In recent years, some of them have also joined oil and gas development ventures.

Through communication with locals, many South Korean workers have been gradually converted to Islam.³¹ The rights and interests of these workers are protected mainly by South Korean embassies and consulates whereas the rights and interests of South Korean Muslims are

maintained mainly through the Middle East branch of the Korean Muslim Committee. The first branch of KMF was established in 1978 in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, where more than 8,000 members were enrolled at that time. Another branch has also been established in Kuwait. With the development of the comprehensive national strength, many laborers have been expatriated from the Middle East to South Korea.

Currently, most of the approximately 100,000 foreign Muslims in South Korea come from Middle Eastern countries. The religious rights of these foreign Muslims are protected through the KMF and mosques. Mosques in South Korea have provided spaces for their religious activities. According to reports, about 800 foreign Muslims, including diplomats, businessmen, workers, and students, gather in the Seoul Central Mosque to pray every week. Mosques in South Korea have directly contributed to the communication between South Korea and sections of the population in the Middle East. What is more, Muslim groups in South Korea have also played a role in dispelling misunderstandings of Muslims in the Middle East on the part of South Korean government. For instance, a Muslim-Uzbek worker who came to Korea as a trainee worker under the South Korean government's training program for Asians was unfortunately assigned to a pig farm. After spending two years raising pigs, the worker called the mosque for help. "The Uzbek worker cried and felt he had sinned by raising pigs," said an official of that mosque; "That kind of incident signifies Korea's negligence over Muslims."³² Mosques in South Korea also carry out free medical services for Muslim workers; "Dawah activities extend to a counseling service for underpaid, injured or illegal Muslim laborers," "on the last Sunday of every month, a medical clinic with visiting doctors, provide treatment and medicine free of charge."³³

Islamic groups' participation in South Korea's international contribution mainly covers two aspects: training Muslims in the South Korean army who are stationed in the Middle East, and raising funds to assist Muslim countries. South Korea has already taken into consideration the fact that there are few Muslims in the South Korean army and Islam is the main belief in the Middle East before they sent troops to Iraq to assist the US. Hence, they invited people from mosques to provide knowledge about Islam to the Zaytun³⁴ Division (자이툰부대). In May 2004, 37 soldiers, who were about to be sent to Iraq, formally converted to Islam in Seoul Central Mosque. During the training, they were entranced by Islam and decided to convert. A soldier named Paek Seong-uk said, "If we are sent to Iraq, I want to participate in religious ceremonies with the locals so that they can feel brotherly love and convince them that the Korean troops are not an army of occupation but a force deployed to provide humanitarian support." Moreover, these 37 South Korean Muslim soldiers all hold that "I became a Muslim because I felt Islam was more humanistic and peaceful than other religions. And if you can religiously connect with the locals, I think it could be a big help in carrying out our peace reconstruction mission."³⁵ From February 16–18, 2005, KMF held lectures on Islam in Seoul Central Mosque for the troops to be

sent to Iraq, some of whom had already converted to Islam. KMF also gave out Islamic lectures to 6 and 7 soldiers in the Zaytun Division on April 5, 2007 and February 27, 2008, respectively, aiming to help the South Korean army to better understand and respect Islam and provide more religious knowledge to Muslim soldiers.

Islamic groups in South Korea also help Muslim countries through funds raising and disaster relief, which improve South Korea's image in Middle Eastern countries. In 2004, the South Korea Muslim Federation donated money to Muslim victims of the tsunami in Indonesia and other countries in South Asia, and, in 2005, they raised funds for the victims of the earthquake in Pakistan.

Second, South Korean Islamic groups have put great efforts in dissipating South Korean people's misunderstandings toward Islam and Middle Eastern countries, and rescuing South Korean hostages in the Middle East. With South Korea's rapid development, Christians increased communication with the secular society. Christianity has played a vital role in promoting South Korea's democratization. Its overseas preaching has also expanded the world over. South Korea's government's attitude is quite ambiguous toward South Korean Christians preaching overseas. Due to the principle of the separation of church and state, the South Korean government does not directly support such activities. Yet, at the same time, it also acquiesces to missionaries' spreading South Korean culture.³⁶ The South Korean government's action offered a good image in the Western Christian world.

According to incomplete statistics, there are more than 12,000 South Korean missionaries overseas now, spread over more than 160 countries and regions all over the world.³⁷ However, comparatively speaking, these missionaries' activities seem incompatible with the Islamic countries in the Middle East. Especially after the 9/11 attacks on the US, there has been confrontation in thoughts between the Islamic and Western worlds, caused by Islamic extremists and terrorist activities, as well as the US military activities targeting so-called "Islamofascism". South Korean missionaries have been kidnapped in turbulent Iraq and Afghanistan. In May 2004, Kim Sun-il, a South Korean translator and Christian missionary working for the Gana General Trading Company (a South Korean company under contract with the American military) was kidnapped in Fallujah by an Islamist group and taken hostage. At the same time when diplomats, governments, and religious figures carried out "rescue diplomacy", South Korean Muslim groups also communicated with Iraq through religious channels. More than 20 threatening calls were made to the Seoul Central Mosque from angry people, after the report of Kim's death and the failure of the rescue of South Korean government on June 23, 2004. Against such backdrop, Imam Lee Haeng-Lae pointed out that "We Muslims were also shocked and felt heartbroken like everyone else. I am worried that this incident may damage the

perception of Islam on the whole. The group that kidnapped and murdered Kim Sun-il is a political group that has nothing to do with Islam. They do not obey Islamic doctrines and are even against Islam. Islam itself is peace.”³⁸ KMF has also comforted Kim’s family and condemned the terrorist activities on behalf of South Korean Muslims. Compared with the South Korea Muslim group’s relative weak rescue in the Kim Sun-il incident, the organization was more effective and direct in 2007 when more than 20 South Korean missionaries and volunteers were kidnaped in Afghanistan by the Taliban.³⁹

On July 26, 2007, KMF and other South Korean Muslims expressed condolences for the death of Bae Hyeong-gyu, a 42 year old South Korean pastor. They also called for the release of the hostages. Family members of the hostages visited the Seoul Central Mosque and asked for help on August 4, 2008. The Imam there said that their former head had already joined the delegation and arrived in Afghanistan, and he was still providing assistance.⁴⁰ It shows that Muslim groups in South Korea have formally participated in official activities in rescue missions. South Korean officials also cooperated in rescuing Muslim groups. For instance, then- Korean ambassador to the Saudi Kingdom, Jaegil Lee, stressed that, “Korea was home to 140,000 Muslims” when he asked for help from the Saudi government.⁴¹ Joining in official rescue diplomacy, Muslim organizations in South Korea also sent delegations to Pakistan. Four members of the KMF set camp in Peshawar and met with several religious leaders, including the chief of the powerful Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), Maulana Samiul Haq. The Maulana assured them of his all-out support and said he would also make a request to the Taliban for the release of the hostages. “The holy month of Ramadan is approaching. We [ask] the Taliban to release the hostages immediately and prove to the world that the Muslims do not believe in violence,” Suliman Lee Haeng-Lae, the imam of the Seoul Central Mosque, said.⁴² Through the efforts of different parties, except two killed hostages, the other 21 hostages were rescued. In this process, the Korea Muslim Federation and members in Seoul Central Mosque had played an exceptional role, which is a very good participation and complement to the “rescue diplomacy.”

Conclusions

The growth of Islam in modern South Korea, which started in the 7th century, has already been a part of its global expansion. Differing from the traditional expansion accompanied by imperial conquests, Islam in modern South Korea came about as the result of wars and was protected by the religious freedom policy of the secular government. Unlike in the US and Europe, Muslims in South Korea are mainly made up of local Muslims and foreign Muslim laborers. There are few immigrant Muslims which explains why Islam has developed rapidly in South Korea. As a religion which came to South Korea quite late, Islam has received help from various Muslim groups from all over the world. Deepening and expanding of South Korea’s Middle East diplomacy involves many aspects, including import and investment of Middle East energy,

mutual flow of labors, participation in peacekeeping activities in the Middle East and many religious emergencies. Besides governments, Islamic groups in South Korea have also played a proper role within the framework of a secularized and democratic nation and made up for the lack of government's Middle East diplomacy on Islam related affairs. Islam in South Korea has developed healthy and actively taken part in social affairs, which helps removing the misunderstanding of South Korea people, and even people all over the world, toward Islam and improving South Korea's national image on the global stage.

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Notes

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⁹ Hajj (holy pilgrimage) to the holy city Mecca, which is located in Saudi Arabia, is of great meaning to Muslims all over the world. The King of Saudi Arabia has been called “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques” since 1980s, and Saudi Arabia sees itself as the leader of Islamic world.

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