

UPF Jerusalem, Israel: Israeli Korea Experts Discuss Peaceful Reunification

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Jerusalem, Israel -- Three experts in Korean studies spoke at an online conference on Korean reunification.

The webinar, titled "Unification of the Korean Peninsula – Historical, National, and Geopolitical Aspects," took place on December 27, 2020.

The event was a joint effort of the Israeli chapter of the International Association of Academics for Peace (IAAP), a UPF association, and the Korean Studies Forum in Israel (KSF).

The presenters on the panel were three experts from the Department of Asian and Korean Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Rabbi Yaakov Luft, the president of the Jerusalem Interfaith Forum for Understanding and Cooperation among Religions, initiated the webinar and also served as the moderator.

Rabbi Luft opened the discussion by highlighting UPF's most recent World Summit, which was held in February 2020 in Seoul, South Korea. He pointed out some similarities between Korea and Israel, which, he said, needed further study.

A question-and-answer session followed the three presentations, led by Koriel Ben Zvi, vice president of UPF-Israel and a graduate student at the Department of Asian and Korean Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Speakers:

Dr. Danny Orbach – a military historian and researcher of modern Japan at the Department of History and the Department of Asian Studies at the Hebrew University.

Dr. Orbach gave a systematic account of Japanese colonialism in Korea (1910 to 1945), describing some of the overriding geopolitical aspects. He depicted the divisions between those Koreans who opposed colonial rule and those who, despite the atrocities inflicted on them, wanted to adopt the advantages it brought in terms of modernization.

Dr. Alon Levkowitz – a researcher of foreign and security policies in Asia, with an emphasis on the Korean Peninsula, in the Department of Asian Studies at Hebrew University, and at Beit Berl College.

Dr. Levkowitz explained the reasons leading to the division of Korea into two nations. He covered several attempts in recent history to create a dialogue between North Korea and South Korea. He said he is pessimistic regarding a possible unification in the near future and pointed out several impediments.

Among the obstacles, he mentioned the vast amount of money that such unification would incur, due to the economic gap between the two nations; the challenges of the demographic imbalance; and the reluctance of North Korea's Kim dynasty to relinquish its power.

Dr. Ira Lian – head of the Korea section, and researcher of the Society, Culture, and Economy of Contemporary Korea, in the Department of Asian Studies at the Hebrew University.

She spoke about society, culture, and economy in both South and North Korea, bringing up the roots of the division, which lay in the ancient kingdom structure of Korea. While showing some similarities in their cultures nowadays, Dr. Lian said the cultural gap is so big as to make the unification of the Koreas an unrealistic possibility. The elders in South Korea may still hold such sentiments, but the young generation of South Koreans feel no special bond toward the people in North Korea.

Dr. Nurit Hirschfeld – the president of UPF-Israel and director of the Jerusalem Interfaith Forum for Understanding and Cooperation among Religions, as well as a lecturer of Hebrew literature and Midrash (interpretation of Scripture).

Dr. Hirschfeld spoke about the moral dilemma of exposing the dire situation of North Koreans. Giving a few testimonies of refugees describing the hunger and horrors of their lives in North Korea, she emphasized the moral obligation not to keep silent in the face of such inhuman suffering. She pointed out the need to overcome the desire for revenge and the resentment toward the current regime, pointing to the German model of reunification.

Dr. Hirschfeld concluded with a relevant quotation from the recent book Mother of Peace, the memoir of UPF co-founder Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, who escaped from the North as a small child and nowadays champions Korea's unification:

During the Cold War, most people in the free world, including the journalists on our fact-finding tours, had no idea what life was like under communism. Others in a position to know chose to turn a blind eye, hesitating to take action out of fear. In the meantime, hundreds of millions in the communist world endured dire circumstances, some not knowing where their next day's food would come from."

