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Lebanese take home 4 awards at lavish Takreem ceremony



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BEIRUT: Four Lebanese have received recognition in the first annual Takreem Arab Achievements Awards, which highlight individual efforts and leadership in the region.

The award, designed to challenge existing negative stereotypes of Arabs abroad and communicate about Arab leadership, is the brainchild of Ricardo Karam, a prominent Lebanese media figure and the director of the NGO Olive Branch.

"Successful Arabs have to create hope for others to identify with and to be able to liken themselves to this," Karam told The Daily Star. "We have to show by example that the world can be open to anyone."

Ten different individuals or organizations selected from a shortlist of 35, received the Takreem awards, which were divided into 10 categories, such as sustainable development of the environment, cultural achievement, Takreem Scientific and Technological Achievement, and Young Entrepreneur and were awarded in a lavish ceremony at Casino du Liban on Thursday evening.

The final winners were selected by a panel of judges that included Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan and the former United Nations secretary general, Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

Lebanese winners featured prominently in the final list with famed international journalist Nahida Nakad scooping up the Arab Woman of the Year Award and the American University in Beirut's Saouma Abou Jaoude, who picked up the Excellence in the Field of Education trophy.

The Cultural Accomplishment Award went to author Jack Shaheen, best known for his many books on the negative Arab image in the modern media, including Real Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People, which formed the basis of the Planet of the Arabs, a short film short listed by the 2005 Sundance Film Festival. Salma Khadra Jayyousi from Palestine was also awarded the cultural prize.

Lebanese NGO Arc En Ciel, one of the region's oldest non-profits, won the Philanthropy and Charitable Services to the Community Award for all its work on sustainable development in education, health and the environment.

The event however was far from just a local affair and the award ceremony was hosted by Al-Jazeera's Laila Shaikhli and attended by an audience of more than 500 guests.

It also won the sponsorship of big international names such as Renault Nissan and Middle East Airlines, with many other groups, such as Greenpeace, affiliating themselves with the Takreem concept.

"I've been working on the concept for six years and have been trying to create a platform for something reputable and sustainable," Karam said. "It has taken a lot of work, time and effort but a lot of different people have come together and helped the awards become a reality," he added.

"Everyone involved in this project shares the same values and the same objectives and is dedicated to spreading them as far as possible."

Although intended for applicants of Arab ancestry, the awards also honored organizations that are making a positive impact on Arab society.

Chris Doyle, the director of the Council for Arab British Understanding, said: "Our organization strives to improve relations and dispel misunderstanding about the Arab world. There are too many people in the West who see it as backward when it is far from that.

"That is why I love the award categories," he said. "The Arab Woman of the Year [award] in itself shows up people's prejudices and illustrates how thought-provoking this award can be. Just to get nominated was an achievement, and actually getting the award [for Exceptional International Contribution to Arab Society] is the icing on the cake."

However, the excitement over the event intended to become an annual affair was dampened by the absence of the Takreem Advancement of Peace award. The trophy was not issued this year due to the ongoing political sensitivities caused by regional turmoil.

"I'm not totally happy but I'm content," Karam explained. "This is only the first year and the awards are only going to get better. Miracles sometimes happen – you never know, we may be able to award the peace prize by next year."

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