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In the News

Middle East awards spark discussion

November 08, 2007

by **Sandra Larriva Henaine '08**, a student in the New Media concentration.

Search for Common Ground, a non-governmental organization whose aim is to prevent conflict worldwide, presented the 2007 Eliav-Sartawi Awards for Middle East Journalism on November 7 during an event co-sponsored by Columbia's School of International Affairs and the Graduate School of Journalism.

The winners

Akiva Eldar, the chief political columnist and editorial writer at the Israeli publication *Ha'aretz*, and Salameh Nematt, a Jordanian journalist, TV and radio commentator and political analyst, won for their collaborative work, "Reaching Across the Divide," a ten-part series based on correspondence between the two journalists.

Another award winner is Gershon Baskin, the Israeli founder and co-director of Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information. Baskin, who defines himself as a peace activist, not a journalist, and as both pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian, accepted his second Eliav-Sartawi Award and said there is "nothing better than being acknowledged and rewarded for something that you love to do."

The fourth award was given to Bassam Aramin, a co-founder of the organization Combatants for Peace and the head of the Al-Quds Association for Democracy and Dialogue. Aramin was not in attendance because of visa issues but was represented by a group of young Palestinian journalists and by John Bell, director of the Jerusalem branch of the Search for Common Ground organization. Bell accepted the award on Aramin's behalf.

In addition, an unannounced "Visionary Award" was presented to Zel Lurie, the founder of the Eliav-Sartawi Awards. Lurie, a 1939 graduate of a certificate program at the Journalism School, created the prizes to recognize the work of journalists who advance a better understanding between Arabs and Israelis.

Impact of the media

The ceremony was followed by a symposium on the impact of the media on the Middle East conflict. The discussion stemmed from John Marks' introductory definition of common ground journalism. Marks said this type of journalism is one where journalists focus on agreement instead of conflict; have a sense of responsibility as opposed to seeing themselves as neutral observers; and strive to keep hope alive.

"A journalist can talk about possibilities even in a region where things seem to be hopeless," Marks said.

Anne Nelson, a professor at SIPA and the former director of the International Program at the Journalism School, mediated an engaging conversation between *Philadelphia Inquirer* columnist and editor Trudy Rubin; Pulitzer Prize winner and Journalism School faculty member Josh Friedman, who is the current director of the International Program at the school; Search for Common Ground president and founder John Marks; and the awardees.

The panel focused on the dominance of extreme conflict in the coverage of the Middle East and explored ways for journalists to present a different vision to the public. Baskin, whose work on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been widely published, said it is "clear that in the [Middle East], peace is not a commodity which sells." After decades of unresolved conflict, people are cynical about the possibility of peace and journalists don't want to write about it.

Regarding coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Rubin said that it "has become a non-issue" since the violence in Iraq escalated. As a result, many newspapers are closing their foreign bureaus and only sending their reporters into conflict zones "[to cover] the fighting," she added.

