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Jeannie Sowers, Assistant Professor of Political Science, travels to Italy

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~ Faculty Travel through CIE

International Perspectives

Center for International Education

JEANNIE SOWERS, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Professor Jeannie Sowers traveled to Italy this spring to present a paper at the European Union Institute workshop on "Transnationalism in the Middle East."



Professor Jeannie Sowers in Italy

With the assistance of a travel grant from the Center for International Education at UNH, I was able to attend a European Union Institute-sponsored workshop in Montecatini Terme, Italy, held March 12-15, 2008. The workshop brought together selected scholars from the Middle East, Europe, and the United States around the topic of "Transnationalism in the Middle East: Local Logics and Global Processes." Each year, the European Union Institute selects several such workshops to host as part of a broader initiative to promote research and understanding on the Mediterranean region.

One of the most common perceptions among US policymakers has been that the Middle East is disconnected from processes of globalization, understood in simplistic terms as the spread of market economies and electoral democracy. The premise of the workshop, in contrast, was that Middle Eastern states and economies are highly enmeshed in global economic and political processes, but that these dynamics are understudied, sometimes misinterpreted, and generally overlook the key influences of local territorial and national politics. Under this rubric, workshop papers analyzed a diverse array of topics, ranging from the

geostrategic concerns underpinning the location and operation of free trade zones in the Persian Gulf, to the effects of the transnational communities of experts and publics involved in democracy promotion. My paper showed how Middle Eastern water experts have been instrumental in creating global norms of water management, but that domestic water projects continue to reflect long-standing concerns with state-building and population distribution, goals often in tension with emerging paradigms of resource management.

As befit the topic of the workshop, many of the participants were drawn from transnational diasporas and communities. Their hyphenated identities illustrated the limitations of thinking about the modern Middle East either in terms of homogenizing

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processes of 'globalization' that 'flatten the world' or in purely national terms. The workshop included participants who identified themselves as Kurdish-German, Palestinian-American, Iranian-American, Egyptian living permanently in Dubai, and Armenian-Turkish. Not surprisingly, the workshop was distinguished by lively and informed discussion!

Following the workshop, it was decided to rework the contributions for publication as a special issue of a journal, focusing on the transnational political economy of the Middle East. I learned about a variety of new and emerging avenues of inquiry that may be of interest to our master's students and undergraduate thesis writers and will inform my presentation of material in classes. The workshop also introduced me to several scholars interested in future collaborations.

Since scholars from the Middle East face increasingly difficult obstacles in gaining entry to the United States, venues such as the European Union Institute in Italy become ever more important in sustaining transnational networks studying the Middle East and North Africa. My sincere thanks to CIE, and to the Mediterranean Programme at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, the European Union Institute, whose financial and institutional commitment has sustained these workshops for almost a decade. It was a wonderful experience to share several days of intensive discussion with outstanding colleagues, surrounded by the green of early spring in a small Italian town.

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