

‘Gaza in Context II’ Kicks Off the NHIS Lectures for Fall 2024

Two weeks after the one-year anniversary of the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks, the University of New Hampshire hosts its second ‘Gaza in Context’ seminar.

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Just under two weeks from the one-year anniversary of the Hamas attacks on Oct. 7, 2023, the University of New Hampshire hosted the first New Hampshire International Seminar of the 2024 fall semester, ‘Gaza in Context II.’

The lecture was led by Professor Jeannie Sowers on Tuesday, Sept. 24. ‘Gaza in Context II’ followed a seminar that took place this past February and included new information regarding the violent conflict happening in the Middle East.

With introductions by the International Affairs Program Director Jen Spindel and an appearance by President Elizabeth Chilton, this lecture had the support of many different faculty members at UNH.

“I’m excited to be able to help you kick off this lecture series, and certainly, as we approach the one year anniversary of the start of the most recent major conflict in Israel and the Palestinian territories, today’s seminar will, as the title suggests, provide important context into unimaginable humanitarian challenges facing the millions of people who continue to live in an active war zone, one that seems to be expanding daily,” President Chilton said before Tuesday’s lecture. “I want to express my thanks to her [Professor Sowers] for the effort she’s made to keep and help our campus better understand this incredibly challenging area of geopolitics.”

Dr. Sowers focused on four main issues during her lecture about the humanitarian situation happening in Gaza: (1) She provided a brief recap of recent historical events within the Gaza Strip beginning in 1967, (2) Civilian infrastructure has been heavily impacted during the recent violence, with an estimated 55% or more of buildings in Gaza sustaining damage, due in most cases to Israeli airstrikes, (3) A drop in polio vaccination rates from 99% to 86% has caused a recent polio outbreak, and (4) Water and energy sources have been severely impacted, creating an inhospitable environment for 90% of the population who have been displaced.

“If the parties can pause for polio vaccines, they could pause for food and fuel, and potable water,” Professor Sowers said during the lecture.

Dr. Jeannie Sowers specializes in politics, infrastructure, and the environment in the Middle East. Dr. Sowers has published four books relating to her field of study; she has a master’s and a doctorate in political science studies from Princeton University. Dr. Sowers has done research to analyze patterns of destruction civilians and infrastructures face during conflict and has completed case studies within Palestinian territory.

“I just felt like there was nobody else, and if I don’t do it, who is going to do it?” Professor Sowers said in an interview. “I felt like I had an obligation.”

The New Hampshire International Seminar (NHIS) was created by the Department of Political Science and International Affairs to “cultivate community-wide dialogue on critical global issues” and “engage an undergraduate audience and give some sense of why the presentation is important/useful to understanding some aspects of international affairs,” according to the NHIS event page. UNH has been hosting NHIS events for 40 years to supplement the standing Political Science and International Affairs curriculum.

This topic has been prominent in American media, as well as at UNH. The Palestine Solidarity Coalition of UNH is responsible for organizing many of the protests that occur on campus, many of which call for local as well as global intervention to end the crisis in Gaza. They utilize Instagram to advertise their protests and resources found outside of UNH

However, despite the prevalence of activism on campus regarding the crisis in Gaza, many of the students at the seminar were required to attend in order to receive credit for various International Affairs and Political Science classes.

Professor Sowers isn't worried about those students who may only be attending because they have to. “Some come because they're interested, and then some come because it's part of their coursework. For us, it doesn't matter really, once they come and learn something, that's our goal,” she said.

The International Affairs Program has organized two more NHIS lectures for the fall semester. Dr. Matt Motta will speak at the next lecture to discuss his newest book, *Anti-Scientific Americans: The Prevalence, Correlates, & Political Consequences of Anti-Intellectualism in the U.S.* He will present at the MUB Theater II from 12:40-2 p.m. on Thursday, Oct. 24.

The next will be led by Professor of Political Science Dr. Elizabeth J. Zechmeister of Vanderbilt University. She will be discussing democratic backsliding and global populism. She will present at the MUB Theater II from 12:40 to 2 p.m. on Tuesday, Nov. 12.