

**TOPICS IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS I: INTERNATIONAL LAW**  
POL486H1S/POL2205H1S  
University of Toronto  
Winter 2026

**Instructor:** Elizabeth Acorn

**Email:** elizabeth.acorn@utoronto.ca

**Office hours:**

- Wednesdays 1:15 – 2:15 p.m. or by appointment
- In person in Sidney Smith 3007 or online (sign up for office hours [here](#))

**Class Time:**

- Robarts Library 14190
- Wednesdays 11:10 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

**I. COURSE OVERVIEW**

The purpose of this course is to examine the role of international law in international relations and governance by focusing on selected contemporary issues and debates. The course reviews foundational principles of international law and debates over the role of international law in international politics. The bulk of the course is devoted to the analysis of several pressing issues in international law, including in international criminal law, international law and war, and international trade law.

**II. LEARNING GOALS & OBJECTIVES**

Students in this course will learn to:

- Analyze the foundational principles of international law
- Describe critiques of the traditional histories and approaches to international law
- Analyze current issues in international law and their connection to international relations and governance
- Research and examine an area of international law in depth
- Present their research in writing and in oral presentations

**III. PREREQUISITES**

Undergraduate students in the course are required to have completed POL208Y1 or POL208Y5 (or POLB80H3 and POLB81H3).

#### **IV. COURSE REQUIREMENTS & ASSESSMENT**

##### ***a) Overview of Assessment and Due Dates:***

- Class participation: 15% (ongoing)
- Foundations test: 25% (in class February 11, 2023)
- Reading response: 5% (see sign-up sheet)
- Discussion leader: 10% (see sign-up sheet)
- Research proposal paper:
  - Presentation of research question and preliminary proposal: 10% (in class February 25)
    - 5% of the grade is from a student's presentation in class
    - 5% of the grade is from a student's written presentation, which must be submitted within 24 hours of the student's presentations in class (the written component can take different forms, e.g. the slides that accompany your presentation or the outline of the presentation)
  - Final paper: 35% (due: Tuesday, April 7<sup>th</sup> at 11:59 p.m.)

##### ***b) Description of Assessment***

###### ***Class Participation***

This course is intended to create an active intellectual atmosphere that promotes participatory learning. Students are expected to have engaged with the readings in advance and participate in class by making comments, asking questions, and sharing ideas. Students are always required to interact respectfully with each other.

Student participation grades are based on a combination of attendance and participation in-class discussions and activities. Many weeks of the semester will include discussions of the students' research projects and opportunities to workshop the projects as they develop; participation in these discussions will also count toward a student's class participation grade. *Students are advised that attendance, on its own, will not result in a strong grade for this component of the course.*

###### ***Foundations Test***

This test will cover materials in Weeks 2 – 5 and will be held during the class period on February 11<sup>th</sup>. The test will be composed of a combination of multiple choice and short answer questions.

### ***Reading Response and Discussion Leader***

- *Reading Responses:* students are required to submit 1 reading response over the semester that reflects on the readings assigned for class that week. Students can complete a reading response for Weeks 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12; students must sign-up in advance for their reading response (and can sign-up during Week 2 of the course); student cannot complete a reading response the same week that they are scheduled for the discussion leader assignment.
  - The reading responses should each be a maximum of 2 pages double-spaced and include short in-text citations (e.g., author last name and page number) where appropriate.
  - Reading responses must be posted on Quercus at least 24 hours before class starts. Graduate students should be sure to address at least one of the additional readings in their responses (or another relevant reading they are interested in, if approved by the instructor).
  - In the reading responses, students should engage critically with the readings. While this requires that students understand and convey the main points of the readings, the reading response should not primarily be a summary of the readings. Instead, the response should put the readings in conversation with each other. For example, a successful reading response could compare and evaluate the arguments presented, relate the readings to a broader research agenda or area in international law, or identify and discuss areas that invite further research.
- *Discussion Leader:* each student will be tasked with leading class discussion once during the course and will work in a small group with other students serving as discussion leader for a particular week (students will sign-up for the discussion leader assignment during Week 2 of the course).
    - The discussion leaders for a particular week should work together to create an outline of their plan for the discussion that must be emailed to the instructor by at least 12 p.m. (noon) on the day before class.

### ***Research Proposal Paper***

Over the course of the semester, students will develop a research proposal that examines an area of international law that they are interested in exploring.

- The central objectives of the proposal are to: (1) develop an empirical research question that is situated in existing scholarship; and (2) present a compelling research design to address that question.
- For undergraduate students, the final proposal should be approximately 2,500 words. For graduate students, the final paper should be at least 3,000 words. All students are expected to complete substantial outside research in developing their research proposal.
- Students are strongly encouraged to meet with the instructor at least once to discuss the final paper and should do so well in advance of the final paper deadline.
- More information on the paper and related assignment will be provided over the semester.

## **V. COMMUNICATION AND OFFICE HOURS**

Students are welcome to contact me outside of class and I encourage you to make use of office hours. I am happy to discuss the course and course materials or your more general interests in law and political science and academic and professional goals.

- Email is the best way to contact me (and I prefer this over Quercus messages). I will generally respond within 24 hours (except on weekends, where it may take longer).
- Office hours will be held on Wednesdays from. 1:15 – 2:15 p.m. Sign-up [here](#) or [email](#) the instructor to arrange an appointment.

A few further notes on email:

- Send email from your university email address
- Write emails professionally and courteously and include all relevant information when emailing. If you want to set up a meeting, please include several proposed meeting times.
- It's fine with me for students to use my first name in email or otherwise (I go by Liz); if you prefer to be more formal, please address me as Professor Acorn or Dr. Acorn.

## **VI. COURSE POLICIES**

### **Submitting Assignments**

- All assignments should be submitted electronically via Quercus
- All assignments should be kept by the student until the marked assignments have been released to them and the grades are posted on ACORN

### **Late Penalties**

- Any assignment that is submitted after it is due is subject to a late penalty of a 5-point reduction per day
- There are no late penalties or extension for the Discussion Leader, Reading Response, or Foundations Test. If an emergency arises that prevents a student from completing these assessments, the student must contact the instructor immediately to arrange an alternative.

**Grade Appeal:** should a student believe an answer was graded in error and wish to seek review, they must do the following: no sooner than 24 hours after the grade has been posted, students must contact the teaching assistant that graded the assignment and provide, in writing, specific reasons why the student is seeking a review of the grade. If the student is still dissatisfied after consulting with the teaching assistant, they may seek the instructor's review. Here too the student must provide specific, written reasons for the further review. Grade appeals must be raised within one-week of the grade's posting. Students should be aware that grades can be increased or decreased upon review.

**Academic Integrity:** Students must adhere to the [Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters](#). You are responsible for ensuring that you do not act in such a way that would constitute cheating, misrepresentation, or unfairness, including but not limited to, using unauthorized aids and assistance, impersonating another person, or committing plagiarism. For more information see [U of T Academic Integrity](#) website.

Academic integrity includes understanding appropriate research and citation methods. If you are uncertain about this, please seek out additional information from the instructors or from other institutional resources including the following:

- This tip sheet provides clear and helpful information about appropriate academic citation: <http://guides.library.utoronto.ca/citing>
- Before handing in assignments students can also review this [academic integrity checklist](#) provided by the U of T Centre of Teaching Support & Innovation:

**Use of Artificial Intelligence:** use of generative artificial intelligence tools, including ChatGPT and other AI writing and coding assistants, for the completion of, or to support the completion of, an examination, term test, assignment, or any other form of academic assessment, will be considered an academic offense in this course.

**Privacy & Copyright:** Course videos and materials belong to the instructor, the University, and/or other sources depending on the specific facts of each situation and are protected by copyright. Do not copy or share any course or student materials or videos without the explicit permission of the instructor.

**Recording of Classroom Material by Students:** Recording or photographing any aspect of a university course - lecture, tutorial, seminar, lab, studio, practice session, field trip etc. – without prior approval of all involved and with written approval from the instructor is not permitted.

**Recordings of Webinar Sessions:** any recordings of webinar lecture sessions held within the context of this course will be archived and posted to Quercus to support access to course content by all students. These resources are intended to be used as a student study aid and are not a substitute for participation. Video recordings will primarily capture the instructor and onscreen content. Students will not be visible on video recordings unless their webcam is enabled. Your voice, however, may be captured as an audio recording if you ask a question in class. The same holds true for questions posted in the chat tool. Please speak to the course instructor(s) if you have any concern about your image, voice or text being recorded, to determine if alternative means of participating are possible. Course videos may not be reproduced, posted, or shared anywhere other than the official course Quercus site and should only be used by students currently registered in the course.

## **VII. STUDENT WELL-BEING, INCLUSION, AND ACCOMMODATIONS**

### **Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion**

The University of Toronto is committed to equity, human rights, and respect for diversity. All members of the learning environment in this course should strive to create an atmosphere of mutual respect where all members of our community can express themselves, engage with each other, and respect one another's differences. U of T does not condone discrimination or harassment against any persons or communities.

An inclusive learning environment is critical to the goals and objectives of this course, and it is of great importance to me that students from all backgrounds and experiences feel welcome, participate actively, and have the opportunity to excel in this course. Your reflections or suggestions on how to ensure an inclusive learning environment for you individually or for other students are always welcome.

**Accommodations:** Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. If you have a disability or health consideration that may require accommodations, contact Accessibility Services as soon as possible. Accessibility Services staff are available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals and arrange appropriate accommodations Accessibility Services (<http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/as>).

There are many resources available on campus to support you during the semester. The University's Writing Center and Academic Advising and Support are great resources that can help with academic writing, planning, and more general learning strategies.

Being a college student can be a stressful and challenging time. Take care of yourself and reach out if you could use more support. Consult the University's mental health resources page for all kinds of useful information and contacts.

## **VIII. READINGS AND SCHEDULE**

All students are expected to have completed the required readings for the course *in advance* of class. Readings are available on Quercus.

**Additional readings:** beyond the required readings, most week in the syllabus also list additional readings. Additional readings are not required, but students may want to consult them if the student is new to a topic, working on that topic for their final paper, or are interested to learn and read more.

## PART I: COURSE INTRODUCTION AND FOUNDATIONS

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### **Week 1 (January 7): Introduction to the Course**

- Syllabus review

### **Week 2 (January 14): Introduction to International Law**

- Elena Chacko, "International Law and Political Science: A Retelling," *Georgetown Journal of International Law* 55 (2023): 37-57
- Cecily Rose, Ch. 2 "Sources of International Law," *An Introduction to Public International Law* (Cambridge 2022)
- Shirley Scott, "International Courts and Tribunals," in *International Law in World Politics: An Introduction* (Lynne Rienner, 2017) 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 67-97
- *Germany v. Italy* (State Immunity) [2012] ICJ 99, case summary by Anthony Marinac, available [here](#)
- **Sign-up for discussion leader and reading response (in class)**

Additional:

- Jan Klabbers, "The Making of International Law," in *International Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 21-40
- Malcolm Shaw, "Sources," in *International Law*, 8<sup>th</sup> edition (Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 65-119
- José E. Alvarez, "Legal Positivism and its Discontents," in *The Impact of International Organizations on International Law* (Brill, 2016), pp. 1-52
- Jutta Brunnée. & Stephen Toope, "Introduction," in *Legitimacy and Legality in International Law: An Interactional Account* (Cambridge 2010), p. 1-19.

### **Week 3 (January 21): International Law, So What?**

- UN Charter, (skim and focus on preamble, Article 2, and Chapter VII), available [here](#)
- Hathaway/Shapiro and Walt debate: "What Realists Don't Understand About Law," and Stephen Walt, "There's Still No Reason to Think the Kellogg-Briand Pact Accomplished Anything," *Foreign Policy* (2017), available [here](#) and [here](#)
- Ian Hurd, "Laws of War: Where Both Liberals and Realists Are Wrong," *Lawfare* (25 October 2017), read [here](#)
- Jack Goldsmith and Eric Posner, "Introduction," *The Limits of International Law* (Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 3-17
- Harold Hongju Koh, "Why Do Nations Obey International Law?" *The Yale Law Journal* 106(8) (1997): pp. 2599 – 2603 are required

Additional

- Shirley Scott, "Reading a Multilateral Treaty," *International Law in World Politics: An Introduction* (Lynne Rienner, 2017)

- Jeffrey Dunoff and Mark A. Pollack, "Introduction," in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on International Law and International Relations: The State of the Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)
- Judith Goldstein, Miles Kahler, Robert Keohane, and Anne-Marie Slaughter, "Introduction: Legalization and World Politics," *International Organization* 54, no. 3 (2000): 385–99
- Andrew Guzman, "The Promise of International Law," *Virginia Law Review* 92 (2006): 533–64

#### **Week 4 (January 28): International Law in Domestic/Transnational Legal Orders**

- "Enemy of Mankind" More Perfect (listen, approximately 1 hour), available [here](#)
- Meredith Lilly and Delaram Arabi, "Symbolic Act, Real Consequences: Passing Canada's Magnitsky Law to Combat Human Rights Violations and Corruption," *International Journal* 75(2) (2020)
- Geoffrey Wallace, "International Law and Public Attitudes Toward Torture: An Experimental Study," *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (2013): 105–40
- Cecilia Jacob, "A New Politics of International Criminal Justice: Accountability in Ukraine and the Israel–Gaza war," *International Affairs*, 100(6) (2024): 2563–2581,

#### Additional:

- Courtney Hillebrecht, "Human Rights Tribunals and the Challenge of Compliance," in *Domestic Politics and International Human Rights Tribunals* (Cambridge University Press, 2014)
- Wolfgang Kaleck and Miriam Saage-Maass, "Corporate Accountability for Human Rights Violations Amounting to International Crimes: The Status Quo and Its Challenges," *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 8(3) (2010): 699-724
- Samuel Moyn, "Human Rights are Not Enough," *The Nation* (March 16, 2018), available [here](#)
- Kal Raustiala, "Territoriality in American Law," in *Does the Constitution Follow the Flag?* (Oxford University Press, 2009)

#### **Week 5 (February 4): Critical International Law**

- Makau Mutua and Antony Angie, "What is TWAIL?" *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the American Society of International Law* 94 (2000): 31-40
- Oumar Ba, "Constructing an International Legal Order under The Shadow of Colonial Domination," *Journal of Human Rights* (2023) 22(1): 4-15
- Sheryly Lightfoot, "Emerging International Indigenous Rights Norms and 'Over-Compliance' in New Zealand and Canada," *Political Science*, 62(1) (2010): 84-104.

#### Additional:

- James Thuo Gathii, "The Promise of International Law: A Third World View," Grotius Lecture Presented at the 2020 Virtual Annual Meeting of the American Society of International Law 2020, pp. 1-27 (and skim bibliography), available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3635509>
- Mohamed Sesay, "Introduction," *Domination Through Law, The Internationalization of Legal Norms in Postcolonial Africa* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021)

- Robert J. Miller and Olivia Stitz, “The International Law of Colonialism in East Africa: Germany, England, and the Doctrine of Discovery,” *Duke Journal of Comparative and International Law* 32(1) (2021), pp. 1-25 required
- Gurminder K. Bhambra et al., “Why Is Mainstream International Relations Blind to Racism?” *Foreign Policy* (July 3, 2020)
- Karen Knop, “Why Rethinking the Sovereign State is Important for Women's International Human Rights Law,” in *Human Rights of Women: National and International Perspectives*, edited by Rebecca Cook (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994)

### **Week 6 (February 11)**

- **Foundations Test**

**\*READING WEEK\* (No class February 18<sup>th</sup>)**

### **Week 7 (February 25): Student Proposal Presentations**

## **PART II: CURRENT ISSUES IN INTERNATIONAL LAW**

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### **Week 8 (March 4): Might Makes Right? International Law and the Use of Force**

- UN Charter, Preamble, Articles 2, Ch. VII, read [here](#)
- Sofia Cavandoli and Gary Wilson, “Distorting Fundamental Norms of International Law to Resurrect the Soviet Union: The International Law Context of Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” *Netherlands International Law Review* 69 (2022): 383–410
- Kelebogile Zvobgo, “Ukraine and the Promise and Peril of Lawfare,” *Brookings* (13 March 2025), available [here](#)
- Scott Shapiro and Oona Hathaway, “Might Unmakes Right,” *Foreign Affairs* 104(4) (Jul/Aug 2025): 80-93
- [Student proposal presentations Part 2, if needed]

Additional:

- Erik Voeten, “The Political Origins of the UN Security Council's Ability to Legitimize the Use of Force,” *International Organization* 59(3)(2005): 527-557
- Douglas Guilfoyle, “The Rule of Law and Maritime Security: Understanding Lawfare in the South China Sea” *International Affairs* 95: 5 (2019) 999–1017
- Listen: “Putin’s War and International Law” *We the People* (April 7 2022), available [here](#)
- Listen: “The Biden Administration and the Use of Force,” *International Law Behind the Headlines*, available [here](#).

### **Week 9 (March 11): New Challenges: The War on Terror, Targeted Killings, and Cyberspace/AI**

- **Discussion Leaders 1**
- Rosa Brooks, “Drones and the International Rule of Law,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 28(1) (2014): 85-103
- Mary Ellen O’Connell, “The Killing of Soleimani and International Law,” *EJIL Talk* (January 6,

2020)

- Noah Weisbord, "Sci-fi Warfare," *The Crime of Aggression: The Quest for Justice in an Age of Drones, Cyberattacks, Insurgents, and Autocrats* (Princeton University Press, 2019), pp. 133-150.
- Jane Vaynman and Tristan A. Volpe, "Competition and Collusion: How the AI Arms Race Can Motivate Governance," in *The Artificial General Intelligence Race and International Security* (RAND 2025): 43-54, available [here](#)
- [Venezuela strikes reading tba]
- Research/Writing Workshop: refining research questions

Additional:

- Mary Ellen O'Connell, "Game of Drones," *American Journal of International Law* 109(4) (2015): 889–900
- Barack Obama, "Speech on Drone Policy," *New York Times* (May 23, 2013), available [here](#)
- Michael J. Glennon, "The Irrelevance of Imminence," *Lawfare* (January 15, 2020)
- Michael McLaughlin, "Deterring the Next Invasion: Applying the Accumulation of Events Theory to Cyberspace," *Opinio Juris* (3 March 2023) available [here](#)

### **Week 10 (March 18): Crisis at the International Criminal Court**

- **Discussion Leaders 2**
- Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (skim Parts 2 and 5), available [here](#)
- David Bosco, "Introduction," and "A Constrained Court," in *Rough Justice: The International Criminal Court in a World of Power Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2014).
- Oumar Ba, "A Truly International Criminal Court Why the New Prosecutor Should Look Beyond Africa," *Foreign Affairs* (8 June 2021), available [here](#).
- Alice Speri, "How the US Derailed an Effort to Prosecute its Crimes in Afghanistan," *The Intercept* (5 October 2021), available [here](#)
- Geoff Dancy, "The Hidden Impacts of the ICC: An Innovative Assessment Using Google Data," *Leiden Journal of International Law* (2021) 34(3): 729–747.
- Research/Writing Workshop: aligning methods with research questions

Additional:

- Jose E. Alvarez, "Alternatives to International Criminal Justice," in *The Oxford Companion to International Criminal Justice*, ed. Antonio Cassese (Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 25-40.
- Phil Clarke, "Introduction: The Warlord in the Forecourt," in *Distant Justice: The Impact of the International Criminal Court on African Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 1-21.
- Judith Kelley, "Who Keeps International Commitments and Why? The International Criminal Court and Bilateral Nonsurrender Agreements," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 3 (2007): 573–89
- Charlie Trumbull, "The Administration's Drug Boat Strikes Are Crimes Against Humanity," *Lawfare* (16 December 2025), available [here](#)

### **Week 11 (March 25): International Trade Law**

- Discussion Leaders 3
- Michael Trebilcock, Robert Howse and Antonia Eliason, “An Institutional History of International Trade Policy,” (section in Chapter 1) (Routledge, 2013), pp. 20-41
- Gregory Shaffer, “A Tragedy in the Making? The Decline of Law and the Return of Power in International Trade Relations,” *Yale Journal of International Law Online* (2018): 1-17.
- Sophie Inge and Caroline Hug, “Britain Breaks Ranks with Trump in Bid to Revive WTO,” *Politico* (25 June 2025) available [here](#)
- Raghuram Rajan, “Walled Off,” *Foreign Policy* (Winter 2025): 38-42
- Research/Writing Workshop: writing an effective literature review

#### Additional:

- John H. Jackson, “The Evolution of the World Trading System: The Legal and Institutional Context,” in *Oxford Handbook of International Trade Law*, eds. Daniel Bethlehem et al. (Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 3-53
- Marc Busch and Krzysztof Pelc, “Dispute Settlement in the WTO,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Political Economy of International Trade*, ed. Lisa Martin (Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 1-19
- Judith L. Goldstein, Douglas Rivers, and Michael Tomz, “Institutions in International Relations: Understanding the Effects of the GATT and the WTO,” *International Organization* 61 (2007): 37-67
- On international investment law:
  - Claire Provost and Matt Kennard, “The Obscure Legal System That Lets Corporations Sue Countries,” *The Guardian* (10 June 2015)
  - Weija Rao, “Large Corporations and Investor-State Arbitration,” *Harvard International Law Journal* 65 (2023): 133-163 required, plus case study “b” (ADM v. Mexico, Cargill v. Mexico, and Corn Products International v. Mexico)
  - David Trubek, Alvaro Santos & Chantal Thomas, “Introduction,” in *World Trade and Investment Law Reimagined: A Progressive Agenda for an Inclusive Globalization* (Anthem, 2019), pp. 1-28

### **Week 12 (April 1): Climate Change, Migration, and International Law**

- **Discussion Leaders 4**
- United Nations Paris Agreement (skim, focus on Articles 2, 4, 14), available [here](#)
- Daniel Bodansky, “The Paris Climate Change Agreement: A New Hope?” *American Journal of International Law* 110, no. 2 (2016): 288–319
- Watch: “Why the Paris COP21 Succeeded,” UCTV interview with David Victor, available [here](#)
- Fiona Harvey and Oliver Milman, “A Colossal Own Goal’: Trump’s Exit from Global Climate Treaties Will Have Little Effect Outside US,” *The Guardian* (9 January 2026), available [here](#)
- Jane McAdam, “Displacement in the Context of Climate Change and Disasters,” in *The Oxford Handbook of International Refugee Law* edited by Cathryn Costello et al (2021): Part V, Ch.46

- Listen: “Human Mobility and International Law,” *EJIL: The Podcast!* (2 July 2025), available [here](#)
- Research/Writing Workshop: pulling it all together

Additional

- Daniel Esty and Peter Boyd, “To Move Paris Accord Forward, Bring Cities and Companies On Board,” *Yale Environment360* (March 20, 2018), available [here](#)
- Steven Bernstein and Matthew Hoffmann, “The Politics of Decarbonization and the Catalytic Impact of Subnational Climate Experiments,” *Policy Sciences* 51, no. 2 (2018): 189–211
- Matthew Hoffman, “The Paris Agreement Is Working As Intended, But We’ve Still Got A Long Way To Go,” *The Conversation* (January 6, 2022), available [here](#)

**FINAL PAPER DUE TUESDAY, APRIL 7<sup>th</sup>** (submit via Quercus by 11:59 p.m.)