

Ethics and the Use of Force

DRAFT SYLLABUS

PUBP 506-002 – Fall 2025

George Mason University

Class Time: Tuesday, 4:30pm-7:10pm EST
Classroom: Van Metre Hall, Room 118
Instructor: Meghan Garrity, PhD
Assistant Professor, International Security & Law
Email: mgarrit2@gmu.edu
Office Hours: Tuesday, 3:20-4:20pm (in person), or virtual by appointment
Van Metre Hall, Room 656

Course Description

The use of force appears on the front page (or top of the app) of major newspapers nearly every day: Russia's war in Ukraine, Israel's war in Gaza, civil wars in Sudan, Myanmar, and Yemen. Yet the ethical implications of this use of force is less prominent. This class will focus on ethical decisions and actions in international relations when it comes to using force and the consequences of that force. Some of the questions we will explore include: Should governments consider the morality of their foreign policy? When do states have the right to wage war (*jus ad bellum*)? What are the moral and legal principles that govern their conduct during war (*jus in bello* or *International Humanitarian Law*)? What are mass atrocities and how are perpetrators held (or not held) to account? When, or should, other states intervene in the sovereign affairs of other states? How should states deal with the consequences of war including large-scale refugee flows? To answer these questions we will look at specific cases across the world including Ukraine, Myanmar, China, Ethiopia, Israel, Palestine, Libya, Uganda, and Afghanistan.

The course is divided into three parts. Part I introduces ethics and war in international relations. We begin with the question "what is ethics" and examine ethical approaches to foreign policy. Then we turn to Just War Theory and study one of the most canonical books on the subject, Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars*, with a particular focus on *jus ad bellum* or the right to wage war. Next, we shift to *jus in bello*, the right conduct during war, and analyze contemporary challenges to International Humanitarian Law and state compliance. Part II shifts to mass atrocities, humanitarian intervention, and accountability for the use of force. We investigate atrocity concepts and definitions including genocide, crimes against humanity, and starvation crimes. Then we discuss the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and the role of humanitarian intervention in both limiting harm to civilians once atrocities begin and preventing them before they unfold. We will discuss accountability and justice for violations of IHL and the role of the International Criminal Court. In the final part of the course, Part III, we explore the evolution of the use of force and its consequences including sanctions as a weapon of war and the responsibility for large-scale refugee flows that result from wars.

Learning Objectives

Students in this course will:

- Understand the major concepts and approaches to the subfield of ethics and international relations
- Identify and explain the core challenges, debates, and key actors involved in ethical issues regarding the use of force
- Critically analyze the breadth of ethical issues in international security, challenges to addressing them, and obstacles to coordinated responses for accountability and justice
- Apply the principles learned in this course to new policy situations, such as cyberwarfare, artificial intelligence, ecocide, or disinformation campaigns
- Communicate ideas and arguments clearly, concisely, and effectively through written policy memos and briefs, and oral presentations

Course Materials

In this course we will read a mix of academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy-focused publications (i.e., *Just Security*, *Foreign Affairs*), and reports from international organizations and non-profits such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

We will read portions of the following books. Reading the full text is recommended, but you are only obligated to read the excerpts specified in the syllabus. All books are available on Course Reserve at the Mason Library and most are available through the library website as e-books (see details below). One book (see asterisk*) is only available as a “one-user” e-book (so only one student can open it at a time) so you may wish to purchase the text. All other reading materials will be posted on Canvas under “Modules.”

- *Walzer, Michael. (2015). *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations, Fifth Edition*. Basic Books. [Need to purchase, or “one-user” e-book option available via Mason Library; I will post the most updated Fifth Edition preface on Canvas so you can access any edition]
- Power, Samantha. (2002). *‘A Problem from Hell’: America and the Age of Genocide*. Basic Books. [E-book available via Mason Library]
- de Waal, Alex. (2018). *Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine*. Polity Press. [E-book available via Mason Library]
- Ocampo, Luis Moreno. (2022). *War and Justice in the 21st Century: A Case Study on the ICC and its Interaction with the War on Terror*. Oxford University Press. [E-book available via Mason Library]
- Mulder, Nicholas (2022). *The Economic Weapon: The Rise of Sanctions as a Tool of Modern War*. Yale University Press. [E-book available via Mason Library]

- Bajoghli, Narges, Vali Nasr, Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, and Ali Vaez. (2024). *How Sanctions Work: Iran and the Impact of Economic Warfare*. Stanford University Press. [E-book available via Mason Library]
- Parekh, Serena. (2020). *No Refuge: Ethics and the Global Refugee Crisis*. Oxford University Press. [E-book available via Mason Library]

Course Requirements / Evaluation

ASSIGNMENT	PERCENT OF GRADE	DUE DATE
Class participation	10%	Ongoing
Reading commentaries	25%	Two due before September 30 Two due after September 30
Reading presentations	10%	One before September 30 One after September 30
Policy memo	25%	October 24
Final policy brief	30%	Proposal (5%): September 19 Presentation (10%): Nov 18 or Dec 2 Final brief (15%): December 8

Assignment Descriptions

Class Participation (10%)

Class participation is based on active in-class engagement and attendance. Timely completion of the assigned readings and engaged participation in class discussions are essential requirements of this seminar. Students should come to class each week having read the materials closely and with some questions or points of interest flagged for discussion. Discussions are expected to be respectful; freedom of expression is important to academic discourse and all students are encouraged to participate.

Reading Commentaries (25%)

Throughout the semester students will submit four reading commentaries on the readings assigned for that week (2-3 pages, double spaced – please do not write longer commentaries). Commentaries should **critically analyze two (or more) readings** and, as the semester progresses, draw connections with material from previous weeks. While the commentaries should provide evidence that the student has completed and reflected upon the readings, they should not be reading summaries. The commentaries should address the texts' arguments: what claims surprised you? Do you agree or disagree with the author(s)? How do the readings support or contradict each other? How can the authors' arguments be related to other contexts? Your commentaries may raise questions, topics, or arguments that you would like to further discuss in class. Commentaries should be uploaded to Canvas 24 hours before the class meets (i.e., **Monday by 4:30pm**). Two commentaries are due in the first half of the semester (i.e., Sept 1-Sept 29), and two in the second half of the semester (i.e., Oct 6-Nov 10). One extra commentary may be written and the highest four marks will be recorded. Late

commentaries, submitted after Monday at 4:30pm, will not be accepted. ****You may not submit a reading commentary for the week that you have a reading presentation.***

Reading Presentations (10%)

Each week six students will present on the assigned readings in one of three roles: critic, review of reviewers, extensions. Students will present twice throughout the course of the semester in two different roles. At the beginning of the semester we will discuss the roles and students will sign up for select weeks.

Policy Memo (25%)

Near the end of Part II of the course, students will be given a scenario regarding a state's decision to use force. Students will have one week to prepare a policy memo (1000-1200 words) in response to the scenario outlining: scholarly arguments about the issue presented, policy options, counter-arguments, and your recommended policy. We will further discuss the format of this assignment in class. It is due **Friday, October 24, 11:59pm EST** on Canvas. Late assignments (any time after 11:59pm) will be deducted half a letter grade for each day it is late.

Final Policy Brief (30%)

The Final Policy Brief allows students to further explore an ethical issue related to the use of force that is of personal interest. The assignment is broken into three parts:

- **Policy Brief Proposal (5%):** Propose an ethical issue related to the use of force that you would like to investigate this semester (300-500 words; excluding references). Your proposal should include the following:
 - Identify an ethical issue in international relations (e.g., humanitarian intervention in a certain context, the use of artificial intelligence in war, cyberwarfare, ecocide, nuclear non-proliferation, refugee resettlement, etc.). This may or may not be an issue covered in the course, but if covered in the course the area must be expanded on in much more depth.
 - Identify a specific problem statement that your brief intends to solve.
 - Describe why this is an important issue to examine and why you are interested in this topic.
 - Title your policy brief (*interesting / catchy titles are more likely to engage readers*)
 - Identify an initial list of 8-10 sources of information that you will use to develop your policy brief (outside of course materials). These must include at least 5-6 academic sources, and 3-4 non-academic sources (i.e., think tank & government reports, UN documents, and/or news articles).
 - **References:** Use APA 7th footnotes citation format

This is due via Canvas on **Friday, September 19, 11:59pm EST.**
- **Policy Brief Presentation (10%):** Students will give 5-minute presentations on their policy briefs (*drafts should be completed by this stage*). These presentations will be organized in a conference style with similar topic areas clustered together and questions and answers from the audience. Presentations will take place during the last two weeks of class on **November 18 and December 2.**

- **Final Policy Brief (15%):** The final policy brief (2,500-3,000 words) develops your policy brief proposal into a concise presentation of information that can help policymakers understand, and make decisions about, the ethical issue you have identified. The policy brief should include eight sections: header, executive summary, problem statement, importance, contextualization, policy recommendations, counterarguments, and conclusion. In the contextualization section you should connect your topic area to debates and arguments discussed in class including specific reference to 5-6 class readings. The final brief should also incorporate feedback from peers and responses to questions raised during the policy brief presentations. We will further discuss the format of this assignment in class. This is due via Canvas on **Monday, December 8, 11:59pm EST.**

Grading Standards

Assignment evaluations in this course will be based on the grading scale outlined below:

Letter Grade	Percentage	Interpretation
Excellent A A-	95-100 90-94	Mastery of concepts. Can clearly apply concepts to new situations.
Above Average B+ B B-	87-89 83-86 80-82	Strong understanding of concepts. Acceptable foundation for future work.
Proficient C+ C C-	77-79 73-76 70-72	Basic understanding of concepts. Questionable foundation for future work.
Marginal D	60-69	Weak understanding and foundation for future work.
Failure F	0-59	Failed to demonstrate understanding and/or effort.

Course Administrative Policies

Office Hours

I will hold in-person office hours immediately preceding class on Tuesday from 3:20-4:20pm in Van Metre Hall, Room 656. Office hours are a dedicated time for you to speak to me about any questions you may have regarding readings, assignments, or other concerns about the course. If you cannot meet during this period, or would prefer to meet virtually, please email me with an alternative time.

Email Policy

You may email me with any questions or concerns about the course. I will do my best to respond to your email within 24-48 hours. Students must use their Mason email account to

receive important university information, including communications related to this class. I will not respond to messages sent from, or send messages to, a non-Mason email address.

Absences

Students are expected to attend all class sessions. However, one absence throughout the semester will be excused. Missing more than one class will negatively impact your participation grade.

Late Policy

Students are expected to complete the assignments on the dates specified in the syllabus. Deadlines are posted at the beginning of the semester thus students must plan accordingly; extensions will not be granted. Late assignments will be deducted half a letter grade for each day it is late after the submission deadline.

Technology Policy

Please respect your fellow students by refraining from the use of electronic devices other than those needed to take notes and participate in class. Avoid the temptation to check your email, messages, social media, or news during class as it is disruptive to your learning experience. Phones should be silenced.

Academic Standards

Academic Standards exist to promote authentic scholarship, support the institution's goal of maintaining high standards of academic excellence, and encourage continued ethical behavior of faculty and students to cultivate an educational community which values integrity and produces graduates who carry this commitment forward into professional practice.

As members of the George Mason University community, we are committed to fostering an environment of trust, respect, and scholarly excellence. Our academic standards are the foundation of this commitment, guiding our behavior and interactions within this academic community. The practices for implementing these standards adapt to modern practices, disciplinary contexts, and technological advancements. Our standards are embodied in our courses, policies, and scholarship, and are upheld in the following principles:

- **Honesty:** Providing accurate information in all academic endeavors, including communications, assignments, and examinations.
- **Acknowledgement:** Giving proper credit for all contributions to one's work. This involves the use of accurate citations and references for any ideas, words, or materials created by others in the style appropriate to the discipline. It also includes acknowledging shared authorship in group projects, coauthored pieces, and project reports.
- **Uniqueness of Work:** Ensuring that all submitted work is the result of one's own effort and is original, including free from self-plagiarism. This principle extends to written assignments, code, presentations, exams, and all other forms of academic work.

Violations of these standards—including but not limited to plagiarism, fabrication, and cheating—are taken seriously and will be addressed in accordance with university policies.

[The process for reporting, investigating, and adjudicating violations is outlined in the university's procedures here.](#) Consequences of violations may include academic sanctions, disciplinary actions, and other measures necessary to uphold the integrity of our academic community.

The principles outlined in these academic standards reflect our collective commitment to upholding the highest standards of honesty, acknowledgement, and uniqueness of work. By adhering to these principles, we ensure the continued excellence and integrity of George Mason University's academic community.

Student responsibility: Students are responsible for understanding how these general expectations regarding academic standards apply to each course, assignment, or exam they participate in; students should ask their instructor for clarification on any aspect that is not clear to them.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to upholding the letter and spirit of the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. Under the administration of University Life, Disability Services implements and coordinates reasonable accommodations and disability-related services that afford equal access to university programs and activities. Students can begin the registration process with Disability Services at any time during their enrollment at George Mason University. If you are seeking accommodations, please visit the [Disability Services website](#) for detailed information about the Disability Services registration process. Disability Services is located in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500. Email: ods@gmu.edu. Phone: (703) 993-2474.

Student responsibility: Students are responsible for registering with Disability Services and communicating about their approved accommodations with their instructor in advance of any relevant class meeting, assignment, or exam.

FERPA and Use of GMU Email Addresses for Course Communication

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) governs the disclosure of education records for eligible students and is an essential aspect of any course. **Students must use their GMU email account** to receive important University information, including communications related to this class. Instructors will not respond to messages sent from or send messages regarding course content to a non-GMU email address.

Student responsibility: Students are responsible for checking their GMU email regularly for course-related information, and/or ensuring that GMU email messages are forwarded to an account they do check.

Title IX Resources and Required Reporting

As a part of George Mason University's commitment to providing a safe and non-discriminatory learning, living, and working environment for all members of the University community, the University does not discriminate on the basis of sex or gender in any of its education or employment programs and activities. Accordingly, **all non-confidential employees, including your faculty member, have a legal requirement to report to the Title IX**

Coordinator, all relevant details obtained directly or indirectly about any incident of Prohibited Conduct (such as sexual harassment, sexual assault, gender-based stalking, dating/domestic violence). Upon notifying the Title IX Coordinator of possible Prohibited Conduct, the Title IX Coordinator will assess the report and determine if outreach is required. If outreach is required, the individual the report is about (the “Complainant”) will receive a communication, likely in the form of an email, offering that person the option to meet with a representative of the Title IX office.

For more information about non-confidential employees, resources, and Prohibited Conduct, please see University Policy 1202: [Sexual and Gender-Based Misconduct and Other Forms of Interpersonal Violence](#). Questions regarding Title IX can be directed to the Title IX Coordinator via email to TitleIX@gmu.edu, by phone at 703-993-8730, or in person on the Fairfax campus in Aquia 373.

Student opportunity: If you prefer to speak to someone confidentially, please contact one of Mason’s confidential employees in [Student Support & Advocacy \(SSAC\)](#), Counseling and [Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#), [Student Health Services \(SHS\)](#), and/or the [Office of the University Ombudsperson](#).

Additional Campus Resources

[Center for Leadership and Intercultural Engagement](#)

[Learning Services](#)

[The Writing Center](#)

[Mason Student Services Center](#)

[More Student Support Resources on Campus](#)