



Public International Law

An Open Access Textbook

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Chapter 0

Introductory Note

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ABSTRACT

This introductory open-access note explains the philosophy of *Public International Law: An Open-Access Textbook*. It asks why one might write another textbook in a moment when the genre is rightly treated with suspicion, and answers by treating the textbook as a disciplined, situated, and public teaching form. The note describes the book's commitments to international legal literacy, reflexive critique, open access, 100 percent free-of-cost publishing, lawful textbook access, multilingual publication, culture-specific examples and further readings, and cooperation with students, teachers, associations, and universities across regions, including the planned Arabic rendition with the Law Student Association of AUC.

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Introductory Note

1 Why Another Textbook?

- ¶1 This textbook began with a practical irritation, and perhaps also with a vanity. Public international law is everywhere, but the materials through which students first meet it often make it feel oddly far away. The field appears daily in news reports, court filings, diplomatic statements, protest banners, ministerial speeches, and dinner-table arguments conducted with more confidence than accuracy. People speak of sovereignty, aggression, occupation, genocide, self-defence, sanctions, jurisdiction, immunity. Sometimes they use these words carefully. Sometimes they throw them across the room like crockery. Either way, the vocabulary has escaped the classroom.
- ¶2 A textbook should take that seriously. It should help students understand why these words matter, where they come from, what they allow us to say, and what they sometimes prevent us from seeing. It should not pretend that international law is easy. It is not. It is full of doctrines that look clean until they meet a real dispute, institutions that promise more than they can deliver, and rules that remain legally important even when they are ignored by those with the power to ignore them. But difficulty is not an excuse for obscurity. The task is to make the difficulty usable.

2 The Textbook Problem

- ¶3 Writing a textbook is not an innocent act. Textbooks arrange fields. They decide what comes first and what comes later. They turn disputes into chapters, controversies into headings, and scholarly mess into something a student can carry into an exam, a seminar, or, if things go badly, a ministry. They can produce a false calm. They can make the author sound more certain than any human being has a right to sound before lunch.
- ¶4 All this is true, and it is not a reason to avoid the genre. It is a reason to inhabit it carefully. The canon of public international law is not sacred, but it is not useless either. Students need to learn the professional vernacular: sources, treaties, custom, statehood, jurisdiction, immunity, responsibility, use of force, human rights, dispute settlement. Without that literacy, critique has no object and indignation has no grammar. The problem is not that students learn the canon. The problem is when they are taught to confuse the canon with the world.

3 International Law Now

- ¶5 We live at a strange moment for international law. It has probably never been more publicly visible. International courts are watched in real time. Provisional measures become news alerts. The language of genocide, aggression, occupation, complicity, sanctions, self-defence, starvation, and war crimes circulates far beyond professional legal circles. A generation ago, one might have had to persuade students that international law mattered. Today the harder task is different: to show them how it matters, and how to tell the difference between legal presence, legal authority, institutional action, and practical effect.

- ¶16 That difference is not academic fussiness. Ukraine, Gaza, Iran, climate change, migration, digital platforms, sovereign debt, vaccine inequality, universal jurisdiction, and immunity all show the same uncomfortable pattern. International law is often present as vocabulary, procedure, judgment, and institutional movement. It may frame a crisis, name a wrong, authorize a claim, or make power answer in a language it does not fully control. But it does not always stop the violence, deliver the remedy, compel the judgment, or reach the actor that most needs reaching. This is not a reason to abandon the field. It is a reason to teach it with fewer fairy lights.

4 Legal Literacy and Reflexive Critique

- ¶17 The book tries to occupy a careful ground. It is committed to international legal literacy, because students need doctrine, cases, institutions, sources, and forms of argument. But literacy alone is not enough. A student who can recite Article 38, Article 2(4), Article 51, jurisdictional heads, or immunity categories without understanding what they do in the world has learned the alphabet but not the language.
- ¶18 Critique alone is not enough either. It is too easy to teach international law as a series of exposures: here is the hypocrisy, here is the hierarchy, here is the violence behind the form. Much of that critique is necessary. Some of it is indispensable. But if critique becomes only a habit of unmasking, it can leave students clever and stranded. They learn to distrust every legal form before they learn how to use one responsibly.
- ¶19 The position I want the book to take is neither reverence nor disenchantment as final posture. It is not pragmatism either, if pragmatism means a shrug, a compromise, or the tired wisdom that this is simply how things work. It is closer to situated reflexivity: thinking from inside the legal materials while remaining alert to the histories, institutions, inequalities, and exclusions that make those materials possible. The lawyer remains responsible to sources, competence, procedure, and doctrinal discipline. But the lawyer also has to ask what a legal argument makes visible, what it leaves outside, who can use it, who is burdened by it, and what kind of world it helps stabilize.

5 Where I Stand

- ¶10 I do not write this from nowhere. No one does, although textbooks often pretend otherwise. I write as someone trained in the European tradition of public international law, formed partly by its professional habits and partly by impatience with them; as a Greek scholar writing also from Cairo; as a teacher who has taught on five continents and watched students enter international law through examples, categories, and anxieties that were not always their own; and as someone who knows that arranging a field for others is an exercise of authority, even when performed with good intentions and a slightly chaotic desk.
- ¶11 That positionality does not appear here as a ceremonial confession before the real textbook begins. It appears in the writing choices. I do not organize the chapters as neutral inventories of rules. I begin with the public life of concepts, because students usually meet international law first through crises, claims, and arguments, not through Article 38 in splendid isolation. I define concepts functionally, asking what they do: what authority they allocate, what relationships they create, what conduct they regulate, what arguments they make available, and what they conceal when taught too narrowly.
- ¶12 It appears in the decision to teach distinctions obsessively. Validity is not effectiveness. Legal condemnation is not practical control. Jurisdiction is not enforcement. Immunity is not legality. Consent is not freedom. Sovereign equality is not equality of condition. These distinctions are not pedantic housekeeping. They are a way of giving students tools to think without being captured by slogans, including slogans I might politically like.

- ¶13 It appears in the examples. The book does not treat the Global South, the Arab World, or postcolonial histories as occasional illustrations of suffering appended to a basically European doctrinal story. Colonial administration, mandates, Suez, Palestine, Gaza, Bandung, resource sovereignty, investment arbitration, vaccine inequality, digital dependence, and the Arab League appear because they help explain how international law works, not because they provide local colour. At the same time, I do not pretend that there is one Arab experience, one Greek experience, or one postcolonial experience of international law waiting to be faithfully represented by me. The more modest choice is to let these examples disturb the geography of the standard account.
- ¶14 It appears in the tone. I try to write as a teacher who respects students enough to be clear with them. I avoid the grand voice of the textbook oracle, partly because it is politically suspect and partly because it is boring. I also avoid the academic pleasure of making everything sound more difficult than it is. When a doctrine is technical, I try to explain the technicality. When a point is morally charged, I try not to shout. When a distinction matters, I say why. When the law disappoints, I try to say precisely where the disappointment lies: in the rule, the institution, the politics, the remedy, the forum, the enforcement stage, or our expectations.
- ¶15 It appears, finally, in the choice to keep doctrine and critique in the same room. I do not want a textbook in which doctrine occupies the main floor and critique lives in a tasteful annex at the back. Nor do I want a book in which critique burns the house down before students have learned where the doors are. The wager is that students can learn jurisdiction, immunity, sources, responsibility, and use of force as law, while also learning how those doctrines have histories, politics, blind spots, and distributive effects. That is the book's position. It teaches the canon, but does not ask students to kneel before it.

6 Open Access

- ¶16 That is also why the book is open access. A textbook about public international law should be public in more than name. The Textbook Project is A2KF's open-access publishing platform for academic textbooks, and the model is deliberately simple: A2KF does not charge readers, teachers, students, or authors. It is 100 percent free of cost. Not discounted, not free after institutional login, not free if one first proves membership in the correct professional tribe. Free.
- ¶17 The project begins from a practical problem that almost every teacher recognizes and that polite publishing conversations often glide past. Good textbooks are frequently too expensive, locked behind institutional access, unavailable in the reader's language or region, or obtained through informal and sometimes unlawful channels because no adequate lawful route exists. This is a miserable arrangement. It turns the first act of study into a small negotiation with price, geography, language, password systems, and conscience.
- ¶18 The response is to publish peer-reviewed textbooks without paywalls, chapter by chapter, with open licences and curated translations or renditions. Removing commercial and predatory intermediaries from the basic act of textbook access does not solve every problem in legal education. It does, however, remove one unnecessary tollbooth from the road. Students should not have to begin public international law by learning the private international law of circumventing access barriers.

- ¶119 There is also an authorial reason for doing this. Many textbook authors receive little or no meaningful financial return from conventional publishing. The book circulates, the price rises, the author receives the moral satisfaction of seeing a cover on a shelf and perhaps enough royalties to buy lunch, depending on the lunch. Here the return is different: scholarly use, teaching value, and service to the community. Authors keep intellectual control while giving the work a clearer public purpose. The platform is therefore not only a website for books. It is a working example of what access to knowledge requires when price, language, region, and lawful distribution are treated as scholarly problems, not afterthoughts.
- ¶120 I also hope the book will travel institutionally. It is meant for universities, teachers, students, libraries, and associations that may wish to use it, share it, argue with it, or build around it. A textbook should not behave like a monument. It should behave more like a table: people gather around it, put things on it, mark it up, complain about it, and occasionally spill coffee on it. That is a good life for a teaching text.

7 Many Languages

- ¶121 The multilingual character of the project matters just as much. English is important in international law, but international law does not belong to English. The Greek version is written by me in Greek as an original text. The Arabic version is conceived as a rendition, not a mechanical translation. I use that word deliberately. A serious Arabic text should not sound like English that has been marched through a dictionary and ordered to behave. It should read as Arabic legal prose: clear, elegant, contemporary, precise, and alive to the students who will actually read it.
- ¶122 Student cooperation is one of the parts of the project that gives me the most pleasure. The planned work with the Law Student Association of AUC on the Arabic rendition is one concrete example, but the ambition is wider: to let students, teachers, and institutions in different regions help the textbook travel across language and place. This makes the project less solitary. It brings students into the life of the work, not as passive consumers but as collaborators in making legal education move. That feels right. International law is always crossing borders, usually with paperwork. A textbook on international law should be allowed to cross them too.

8 Local Examples

- ¶123 The different language versions will not always need identical examples, references, or additional readings. The legal architecture should remain faithful, of course. Jurisdiction cannot become something else because the language changes. Immunity cannot be reinvented every time it crosses a border. But examples live differently in different legal cultures. A Greek version may sensibly draw on Greek legal experience, regional jurisprudence, maritime examples, constitutional references, or Greek scholarship. An Arabic rendition may draw on Arab legal debates, regional histories, local institutions, Palestine, Suez, Bandung, the Arab League, and the many ways in which collective identity has appeared in international law as symbol, structure, performance, and deferral.
- ¶124 This is not dilution. It is good teaching. The point is not to localize everything. The point is to know when localization helps the student see. A doctrine becomes clearer when the example has some affective and historical proximity, when the reader recognizes the terrain, or when the case shows that international law did not happen only somewhere else, to someone else, in a language someone else owns.

9 Cooperation

- ¶25 I would like the textbook to become an invitation. Universities can use it. Teachers can assign it. Students can test it against the crises through which they are learning the field. Associations can help carry it into new settings. Readers can tell me where it is unclear, where it is too long, where it is too pleased with itself, and where it needs more examples. A textbook improves when it is used, not when it sits in a perfect PDF looking dignified and unread.
- ¶26 International law is a strange subject to teach because it is both indispensable and frequently exasperating. It offers a vocabulary for making power answerable, even when power is in no hurry to answer. It gives students tools for naming injury, authority, responsibility, and institutional failure. It also teaches patience, because many legal answers begin with the professionally unsatisfying phrase: "It depends." This book tries to make that "it depends" less evasive and more illuminating.
- ¶27 That, in the end, is the spirit of the project: serious law, open doors, many languages, useful examples, and enough intellectual honesty to admit that international law is not magic. It is better than magic. It is a craft. And like all crafts, it is learned by doing, reading, arguing, revising, and occasionally discovering that the footnote you trusted has betrayed you.