

POLITICS OF WAR

Political Science 343
Portland State University | Summer 2026

Syllabus and Course Schedule

Compiled from the Canvas course export on October 5, 2026.

Contents

- Instructor and Contact Information
- Course Description
- Learning Objectives
- Assignments and Assessment
- Courtesy, Conduct, and Resources
- Course Calendar
- Detailed Weekly Course Schedule

Instructor and Contact Information

INSTRUCTOR

David Kinsella
Department of Politics and Global Affairs Hatfield
School of Government

CONTACT INFORMATION

Phone: 503.725.3035 Email: kinsella@pdx.edu Office:
Urban Center Building , 650L
Office Hours: by appointment -- in person or via Zoom

Course Description

Issues of war and peace have long been central to world politics. War remains an enduring feature of international history and a constant subject of analysis and debate. Yet wars vary greatly in their causes, participants, methods, and consequences. Some are fought between major powers, while others involve civil conflict, insurgency, proxy forces, terrorism, covert action, or combinations of these forms.

This course examines the causes, conduct, and changing character of violent conflict in world politics. We begin with explanations for war and the origins of major-power conflict, before turning to regional, proxy, civil, and post-Cold War warfare. We then consider covert action, terrorism, and counterterrorism, including the relationship between military strategy and political objectives. The final part of the course addresses the legal and ethical restraints on warfare and the implications of emerging technologies, including autonomous weapons, cyber operations, and hybrid warfare. Throughout the course, students will use historical and contemporary cases to evaluate competing explanations, strategic choices, and moral arguments concerning the use of violence.

Learning Objectives

The general objective of this course is to develop students' capacity to critically examine the causes, conduct, and consequences of war; consider competing explanations and responses to violent conflict; and communicate the results of their analysis to others. These objectives are to be accomplished by exposing students to historical and contemporary cases, relevant scholarship in international politics and security studies, and legal and ethical debates concerning the use of force. By the end of the term, students should be able to:

- **Demonstrate a broad, empirically grounded understanding of war and militarized conflict.** Identify and explain major forms of political violence, including great-power war, regional conflict, civil war, insurgency, proxy warfare, covert action, terrorism, and counterterrorism. Apply this knowledge to interpret contemporary conflicts and military interventions.

- **Analyze the causes and dynamics of war using appropriate theoretical frameworks.** Evaluate how factors such as the international distribution of power, security dilemmas, domestic political conditions, grievances, identity, strategic incentives, and external intervention help explain the outbreak, continuation, escalation, and termination of conflict.
- **Assess the strategies and instruments employed by states and nonstate actors in warfare.** Explain how conventional military operations, insurgency, terrorism, covert action, targeted killing, proxy relationships, information operations, cyber operations, and emerging technologies are used to pursue political objectives, and evaluate the conditions under which these strategies succeed or fail.
- **Develop and articulate coherent, well-reasoned positions on legal and ethical dilemmas arising from war.** Apply principles such as distinction, proportionality, military necessity, and humane treatment to historical and contemporary cases, including conflicts that blur the boundaries between warfare and law enforcement. Support conclusions with evidence drawn from course readings, films, lectures, and independent research.

Assignments and Assessment

Reading, Films, Lectures

Course materials have been organized into four thematic modules, one per week. For each, you are assigned three kinds of work: (i) reading, (ii) video, and (iii) mini-lectures.

Readings . All assigned readings are journal articles available online through the PSU Library's website. There are two per week. In addition to the assigned articles, you should be reading, on a regular basis, some newspaper that provides thorough coverage of world affairs (e.g., the New York Times or the Washington Post). I may occasionally add an article from the news to your assigned reading for the week.

Films . All assigned videos include URLs. You access two of these through the PSU library; the others are on YouTube. I have also included unofficial transcripts. These are generated by AI from the closed captions, so they are not necessarily free from errors. If you use them and notice anything that needs correcting, please let me know.

Mini-lectures . These are relatively brief “lectures” of the type I would normally deliver in the on-campus version of this course, but transcribed -- sometimes with screenshots from PowerPoint presentations -- for your reading. For most topics, there are three of these per week. A link will take you to a Word file, which you may then download or read online. There are four of these per week.

Keep in mind that this is a regular 4-credit course compressed into four weeks. As such, we cover much the same ground as we would during a regular 10-week term. It is pretty fast-paced and there is a lot of course material to get through each week, so try not to fall behind.

Quizzes

You will take two quizzes in this course, each consisting of 20 multiple-choice questions. Quiz A covers material presented in modules 1 and 2; Quiz B, modules 3 and 4. Each quiz is timed for 90 minutes and will be available to take anytime during a designated 4-day block, starting noon on Thursday and ending midnight on Sunday . You may consult your notes and downloaded course material while you are taking a quiz. You may not consult other information during a quiz, including via internet searches or AI. Each quiz accounts for 25 percent of your course grade.

Final Project

As a final project for the course, you will analyze one contemporary international or internal conflict, focusing on a specific question, dynamic, or strategy rather than a full history (the CFR Global Conflict Tracker is a good starting point). Your analysis should draw on course concepts, cover background, causes/dynamics, conduct and consequences, and an assessment of the conflict's present state and prospects. The length of the analysis should be about 1,250 words (5 double-spaced pages), plus visuals and a reference list (not counted toward word length). See Assignments for further instructions. The final project accounts for 50 percent of your course grade.

Courtesy, Conduct, and Resources

Academic dishonesty . Students are responsible for being familiar with the PSU Code of Student Conduct and Responsibility , especially the section concerning academic misconduct -- that is, plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty. If you are unsure of the definition or consequences of academic misconduct, please consult with me.

Use of Generative AI tools . Using tools to check and correct your own writing (built-in spelling and grammar checkers or third-party tools like Grammarly) is different from using generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools to create content or structure in response to your prompts (like ChatGPT). In your work for this course, use of the first sort of tool is encouraged, while use of the second sort of tool is subject to the following limitations: Using generative AI to complete written assignments, including examinations, is not permitted. However, you may use these tools to study, help conduct research, or brainstorm ideas and arguments. The use generative AI tools outside these parameters qualifies as academic misconduct . If you are uncertain about the allowable use of generative AI in the course, please consult with me in advance.

Discrimination . PSU's policies require faculty members to report any instance of sexual harassment, sexual violence, or other forms of prohibited discrimination. If you would rather share information about these experiences with an employee who does not have these reporting responsibilities and can keep the information confidential, please contact a confidential advocate (503.725.5672 or online) or another confidential employee listed on the sexual misconduct resource webpage .

Disabilities. If you have, or think you may have, a disability that may affect your work in this class and feel you need accommodations, contact the Disability Resource Center to schedule an appointment and initiate a conversation about reasonable accommodations. The PSU CARES Team, hosted by the Dean of Student Life, is available to consult with you regarding any issues of students in distress, including sexual misconduct.

Course Calendar

The topics covered each week are as follows:

Week 1	Causes of War and Great-Power Conflict
Week 2	Regional, Proxy, Civil, and Post-Cold War Conflict
Jul 30 - Aug 2	Quiz A
Week 3	Covert War, Terrorism, and Counterterrorism
Week 4	Wartime Ethics and Future of War
Aug 13 - 16	Quiz B
Aug 16	Final Project due

Detailed Weekly Course Schedule

The following schedule summarizes the substantive content presented in the four weekly Canvas modules and the major course assessments.

Week 1 - Causes of War and Great-Power Conflict

We introduce competing explanations for why wars occur, from human behavior and domestic politics to pressures created by the international system. We examine the security dilemma, balance of power, alliances, misperception, and shifts in relative power. Using the origins of World War I and World War II, we consider how structural pressures, military planning, nationalism, leadership, and diplomatic crises can combine to produce large-scale war. We also ask whether power transitions inevitably lead to conflict.

Readings

- Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory." *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18 (Spring 1988): 615-628.
- Manjari Chatterjee Miller, "The Most Dangerous Game: Do Power Transitions Always Lead to War?" *Foreign Affairs* 103 (July-August 2024): 128-135.

Film/Documentary

The Guns of August (Universal, 1964) Based on Barbara Tuchman's Pulitzer Prize-winning history, the documentary examines how alliances, military planning, nationalism, miscalculation, and escalating commitments transformed the 1914 crisis into a general European war. Its central theme is how decisions that appear rational in isolation can collectively produce catastrophic conflict.

Mini-lectures

- What Is War? Three Images
- Security Dilemma
- The July Crisis and the Causes of World War I
- Origins of World War II

Week 2 - Regional, Proxy, Civil, and Post-Cold War Conflict

We turn from great-power war to conflicts fought within states and across regional boundaries. We examine how grievance, deprivation, identity, economic opportunity, and collective-action problems contribute to rebellion and civil war. We also consider why states support local armed groups and how tensions between sponsors and proxies shape conflict. Using cases from the Middle East, Yugoslavia, Iraq, and ISIS, we explore the blurred boundaries among civil, regional, interstate, and transnational warfare.

Readings

- John Mueller, "The Banality of 'Ethnic War.'" *International Security* 25 (Summer 2000): 42-70.
- Niklas Karlén, "Making Stars Align: Partnerships Between State Sponsors and Armed Groups." *European Journal of International Security* 11 (May 2026): 166-83.

Film/Documentary

Death of Yugoslavia (BBC, 1996). Episodes 4 (The Gates of Hell) and 5 (A Safe Area). These episodes trace the Bosnian War's descent into ethnic cleansing and mass violence, while examining the failures and limitations of international diplomacy, UN peacekeeping, and civilian protection. They also show how an internal conflict became regionalized and increasingly subject to outside intervention.

Mini-lectures

- Arab-Israeli Wars and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict
- Explaining Rebellion
- New Wars?
- Rise of ISIS

Assessment: Quiz A - available July 30-August 2; 20 multiple-choice questions; 90 minutes.

Week 3 - Covert War, Terrorism, and Counterterrorism

We examine forms of political violence conducted outside conventional warfare. We consider why states employ covert action, how secrecy affects democratic accountability, and how propaganda, political interference, paramilitary operations, and targeted violence serve policy objectives. We then analyze terrorism as a political strategy and assess counterterrorism responses, including intelligence, repression, disruption, and targeted killing. Finally, we consider how September 11 produced an increasingly global and militarized campaign against terrorist organizations.

Readings

- Renanah Miles Joyce and Virginia Page Fortna, "Extremism and Terrorism: Rebel Goals and Tactics in Civil Wars." *Perspectives on Politics* 23 (March 2025): 154-174.
- Bryce Loidolt, "Were Drone Strikes Effective? Evaluating the Drone Campaign in Pakistan Through Captured al-Qaeda Documents." *Texas National Security Review* 5 (Spring 2022): 53-79.

Film/Documentary

Battle of Algiers (Casbah Films/Igor Film, 1966). Requires PSU login. Widely regarded as a classic of political cinema, the film explores terrorism and urban insurgency as political strategies, along with the intelligence, repression, and torture used to defeat them. It highlights the distinction between achieving short-term military control and securing long-term political legitimacy.

Mini-lectures

- Covert War and Democracy
- Terrorism as a Political Strategy
- Counterterrorism
- Global War on Terrorism

Week 4 - Wartime Ethics and Future of War

We examine the moral and legal limits on the resort to war and the conduct of military operations. We introduce just-war theory and the principles of distinction, proportionality, military necessity, and humane treatment, then apply them to current controversies involving U.S. military force. We also consider how autonomous weapons, cyber operations, and hybrid warfare blur distinctions between war and peace, military and civilian targets, and overt and covert action. Throughout, we ask whether existing rules can adequately govern future warfare.

Readings

- Elliot Winter, "The Compatibility of Autonomous Weapons with the Principle of Distinction in the Law of Armed Conflict." *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 69 (October 2020): 845-876.
- Frederik A. H. Pedersen and Jeppe T. Jacobsen, "Narrow Windows of Opportunity: The Limited Utility of Cyber Operations in War." *Journal of Cybersecurity* 10, no. 1 (2024).

Film/Documentary

Zero Days (Magnolia Pictures, 2016). Required PSU login. The documentary examines Stuxnet as a new form of covert cyberwarfare and considers the secrecy, attribution problems, and limited accountability surrounding cyber operations. It also raises concerns about proliferation, unintended consequences, and the difficulty of controlling digital weapons once they are released.

Mini-lectures

- Just War Theory
- Legality of U.S. Operations in Iran and the Caribbean
- Killer Robots
- Hybrid Warfare

Assessments: Quiz B available August 13-16; Final Project due August 16.