INTERNATIONAL LEGAL RESEARCH
A Brief Introduction & Research Guide

Defining International Law

International law is defined broadly to include the “legal system governing the relationships between nations; more modernly, the law of international relations, embracing not only nations but also such participants as international organizations and individuals (such as those who invoke their human rights or commit war crimes).” BLACK’S LAW DICTIONARY. Several different things are commonly referred to as “international law” including:

Public International Law – encompasses the laws governing relationships between different countries (e.g., the laws of war), certain relations between countries and individuals (e.g., human rights), and relations with intergovernmental organizations (e.g., the United Nations).

Private International Law – governs private relationships across international borders. Also known as “conflict of laws” which relates to what laws apply to cross-border private disputes. Private international law deals with cross-border family law, wills and estates, enforcement of foreign judgments, business transactions, etc.

Foreign & Comparative Law – foreign law is simply the national laws of foreign countries including constitutions, statutes, regulations, and case law. Sometimes called “municipal law.” Comparative law refers not to a substantive body of law, but rather the study of comparisons between two or more legal systems or countries.
“International human rights law,” “international criminal law,” “international humanitarian law,” “international environmental law,” etc. are loose subject divisions and relevant materials can come from a variety of sources.

For a general introduction to international law at CUNY see:

- Mark W. Janis, An Introduction to International Law, Call number KZ 3140.J36 A35 2003 (On shelf in International Law Reading Room); or

- Thomas Buergenthal and Sean D. Murphy, Public International Law in a Nutshell, Call number KZ 3410.B84 2002 (Reserve, ask at Circulation).

**Sources of International Law**

The primary sources of international law include:

1. **Treaties and Conventions** – express agreements between governments whether bilateral or multilateral.

2. **International Customary Law** – international customs and practices that by their “common adoption and long, unvarying habit” have “come to have the force of law.” Black’s Law Dictionary.


4. **Judicial Decisions and Scholarly Commentary** – “judicial decisions and the teachings of the most qualified publicists of the various nations.” Statute of the International Court of Justice, Art. 38.

These sources are the primary tools utilized in analyzing international law in preparation of an article or memorandum or advocating in a brief.

**Strategies for International Legal Research**

For first time researchers of international law, we strongly recommend taking the International Legal Research Tutorial (Duke University) – [http://law.duke.edu/ilrt/](http://law.duke.edu/ilrt/) – an online interactive tool that walks through the basic forms of international law and suggests both online and print resources.
Begin with Research Guides

*CUNY Law Library Website* – “Research Links/International and Foreign Laws,”


*Electronic Information System for International Law (EISIL)*,


*Germain’s Transnational Law Research*, Call number K 85. G47 1991 (Reference area)

Read and Consult Secondary Sources Relevant to Topic

Secondary sources can provide relevant background to put issue into larger context, provide information and leads on conventions and treaties, customary international law, general principles of law, and authoritative commentary relevant to a specific topic.

*Locating Books, Treatises, Articles*

CUNY + Online Catalog (CUNY Law School or all CUNY schools)


- Westlaw, Lexis & HeinOnline
- Index to Legal Periodicals & Books (current & “retro” 1908 – present)
- Index to Foreign Legal Periodicals


Non-Legal Articles and Resources, CUNY Law Library Website,

- Academic Search Premier
- JSTOR/Project Muse

Google Scholar/Google Books
Dictionaries and Encyclopedias

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PUBLIC INTERNATIONAL LAW, KZ 1160. E53 1992

PARRY AND GRANT ENCyclopedic DICTIONARY OF INTERNATIONAL LAW (John P. Grant & J. Craig Barker eds.) KZ1163. P37 2004

Non-governmental/International Organizations Materials


Find and Consult Relevant Primary Sources

Treaties and Conventions

CUNY Law Library Website, International and Foreign Law, “Treaties”
http://www.law.cuny.edu/library/legalsites/intlforlaw.html

- Hein Online Treaties and Agreements Library, (use CUNY website)
- Westlaw & Lexis
- United Nations Treaty Collection,

http://www.state.gov/s/l/treaty/

Foreign Law Resources

Foreign Government Information

- Library of Congress - Country Studies,
  http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cshome.html
- Foreign Governments (Northwestern Univ.) –
  http://www.library.northwestern.edu/govinfo/resource/internat/foreign.html
- Foreign Government Resources on the Web (University of Michigan) –
  http://www.lib.umich.edu/govdocs/foreign.html
Foreign Constitutions, Legislation, and Case Law


*International Decisions/Case Law*

International Court & Tribunals Library – World Legal Information Institute, [http://www.worldlii.org/int/cases/](http://www.worldlii.org/int/cases/)

Westlaw – International Court of Justice, International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia

Lexis – International Court of Justice, European Human Rights Reports

**Final Tips**

- Don’t confine your research just to online sources, come to the library and pull a book off the shelf.

- Be careful, and skeptical, of websites
  - Try to stick to “vetted” sites
  - Beware of agendas and “experts”
  - Beware of any information for which you cannot find multiple sources

- Let us help, please contact the International Law Librarian – at douglas.cox@mail.law.cuny.edu – or one of the other Legal Research Professors.