COURSE SYLLABUS
HUMANITARIAN FORENSICS AND PEACEBUILDING
FRSC 402/CONF 475
Summer 2027
Modality: Synchronous Online
Days/Times: TBD
Zoom link: TBD

Instructor Information:

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Office Hours:	**TBD**	**TBD**

Course Description/Overview:
This course examines the role of humanitarian forensic science as a peacebuilding tool in addressing issues related to missing persons and mass atrocities in conflict and post-conflict settings. It explores the human, political, and ethical dimensions of absence, loss, and memory, alongside the technical processes of victim location, recovery and identification. Throughout the course, students will develop an understanding of forensic techniques used to locate, recover and identify missing persons and how forensic practice intersects with truth-seeking, justice, and reconciliation efforts. The course also explores the relationship between the lived experiences of conflict-affected populations and technical forensic practices, examining how these play out in real-world contexts. It critically assesses both the limitations and the potential of forensic processes as tools for peacebuilding in post-conflict settings. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives, students will analyze humanitarian forensics as an emerging field of practice and consider its implications for both scientific work and peacebuilding efforts.

Course Learning Outcomes:
Upon completion of the course, students will be able to:

1. Engage with the social, political, and ethical complexities of missing persons issues in conflict and post-conflict settings.
2. Explain current forensic methods and approaches to human location, recovery and identification, including the role of scientific and technological tools, and their practical applications and constraints.
3. Assess the role of forensic science in supporting or limiting truth-seeking, justice, and reconciliation processes.
4. Critically evaluate the limitations, risks, and unintended consequences of humanitarian forensic interventions in conflict-affected contexts.
5. Integrate perspectives from forensic science and peacebuilding to analyze real-world cases and their implications for policy and practice.

Course Materials and/or Required Texts

All required course materials will be posted on Canvas.

Course Performance Evaluation

This course is conducted in an online synchronous format and relies on consistent, active engagement to meet its learning objectives. Students are expected to attend all class sessions for the full scheduled time, complete assigned readings and materials in advance, actively participate in discussions and activities, and submit assignments on time. Because the course emphasizes cumulative skill-building and team-based work, sustained preparation and engagement are essential.

Unless there is an emergency or a documented, serious extenuating circumstance, students are expected to have their cameras turned on during class sessions. Visual presence supports inclusive dialogue, accountability, and meaningful collective learning in an interactive online environment. Students are expected to participate from a setting that allows for sustained attention and engagement. Participation credit will not be awarded to students who are driving, commuting, multitasking, or otherwise distracted in ways that limit their ability to participate fully in class discussions and activities.

If a student anticipates an absence or difficulty meeting these expectations, they should communicate with the instructor in advance whenever possible. In accordance with departmental policy, incomplete grades will be granted only in cases of documented personal or immediate family illness.

Course Assessment

Student learning in this course is assessed through a combination of individual assignments, applied analysis and a group-based final project. Together, these components are designed to support cumulative learning and the application of course concepts to real-world cases involving forensic practice and peacebuilding.

Participation (20pts): Active participation is essential to success in this course. Students are expected to come to class prepared by engaging with assigned readings and materials and to contribute meaningfully to class discussions and activities. Because this course is conducted in an online synchronous format, students are **required to have their cameras turned on** during class sessions in order to support engaged discussion, community building, and effective learning. Participation is assessed based on the quality of engagement, including the ability to ask thoughtful questions, engage in critical dialogue, and offer reflective and respectful responses to peers' contributions. Consistent attendance and active engagement during class sessions are central to fostering a collaborative learning environment and achieving the course's learning outcomes.

Forensics in Context – Current Event Brief (25 pts): For this assignment students will identify and analyze a current or recent case involving missing persons, mass atrocities, or post-conflict recovery. The goal is to examine how forensic processes were/are being used, have been used or can be used in real-world contexts. The analysis should go beyond a simple summary of the case. Students are expected to identify the role of forensic work within the situation and assess what forensic processes can realistically contribute, as well as their limitations. This includes a focused discussion of at least one forensic method relevant to the case (such as human location, the human recovery process, human identification, forensic databases for missing persons, etc.), explaining how it works at a conceptual level and what kinds of uncertainties or constraints it involves. Students must also consider how the case connects to broader issues of truth-seeking, justice, or reconciliation.

Forensic Intervention Assessment (40 pts). For the final project students will work in groups to evaluate the role of forensic processes in a real-world case involving missing persons, mass disasters or mass atrocities. Students will be required to critically assess whether forensic intervention is appropriate in this context, if so, how and under what conditions it should be used. In the analysis students should consider what forensic processes can realistically achieve, what limitations and risks exist, and how their use may shape broader social, political, and ethical dynamics. Students are expected to engage with both the technical aspects of forensic practice and the real-world situations and systems in which it is applied. If it is determined that forensic intervention is appropriate, a focused and realistic approach should be outlined. If it is determined that forensic intervention is not ideal, the analysis should clearly explain why and identify key constraints or alternative considerations.

- **Group memo outlining your assessment and recommendation (3–4 pages) (20pts)**
- **Group presentation summarizing your analysis and final position (20 pts)**

Individual Reflective Evaluation Memo (15 pts). Each student will submit an individual reflexive memo (2–3 pages) reflecting on their learning throughout the course. The memo should consider how your understanding of the relationship between forensic practice and peacebuilding has developed over time. Students should reflect on challenges they encountered, how their assumptions changed, and what they learned, including areas where they feel more confident or need further development. The memo should also consider what it means to engage with forensic work in humanitarian, complex social and political contexts, including any tensions you observed between technical approaches and lived experiences. The emphasis is on thoughtful, critical reflection and intellectual engagement rather than summary of course content.

Grading-related Policies:
All assignments must be submitted through Canvas by the posted deadlines. Assignments submitted up to 2 days late will be accepted with a grade reduction. Once the submission period in Canvas closes, no assignments will be accepted unless prior approval has been granted by the instructor in advance of the deadline.

Assignments submitted by email will not be graded.

Grading Scale

98-100	A+
94-97	A
90-93	A-
87-89	B+
83-86	B
80-82	B-
77-79	C+
73-76	C
70-72	C-
60-69	D
<60	F

Incomplete Grade Policy

Requests for an incomplete grade must be discussed with the instructor at least **4 weeks** before the end of the semester and will be considered only in accordance with departmental and university policy.

Use of Generative AI

Use of Generative AI tools should be used following the fundamental principles of Mason's Academic Standards. This includes being honest about the use of these tools for submitted work and including citations when using the work of others, whether individual people or Generative AI tools.

Academic Standards: Use of AI Tools

(For additional guidance see AI Guidelines for Students | George Mason University)

AI (Artificial Intelligence) Tools Policy:

AI tools are permitted under specific conditions. AI can be a valuable resource for learning, but the work you submit for evaluation and grading must remain your own original creation. Within the framework of this course, I would allow use of AI tools only as supplement to your learning, but not as a substitute for your own intellectual effort. The work you submit must be a product of your own ideas, analysis, and represent your voice. AI-generated content should not replace your core thinking or writing.

Permitted Uses

- *Idea exploration and clarification*: You may use AI (e.g., ChatGPT, Copilot, Claude) to brainstorm, test ideas, or request explanations.
- *Proofreading and grammar support*: You may use tools such as Grammarly or AI-enabled spelling/grammar checkers for editing and clarity.
- *Basic drafting support*: Outlines or concept sketches may be generated with AI, but they must be substantially reworked and developed by you.

Not Permitted

- Submitting AI-generated work as your own.

- Using AI to complete major portions of assignments (for example generating your case analysis, developing recommendations, or producing the reflective memo).
- Relying on AI in ways that obscure your own contribution or bypass the learning goals of the course.

Monitoring
This course does not use AI-detection tools, as they are unreliable. Instead, we rely on your integrity and honesty. If a submission raises concerns or we have suspicions that this might not be your original work based on you other contributions in the class, we will reach out to schedule a separate meeting discuss your work and explain your process.

POLICIES AND ACADEMIC SUPPORT SERVICES

Common Policy Addendum:
Common Course Policies website- https:/stearnscenter.gmu.edu/home/gmu-common-course-policies/

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, co-authored 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. 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 Disability Services Website- https://ds.gmu.edu/ 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 and Non-Discrimination: Access and Compliance with George Mason's Nondiscrimination Policies

George Mason University is committed to providing a safe and non-discriminatory learning, living, and working environment across all educational programs, services, and activities for all members of the University community. University educational programs, services, and activities will be free from discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, ethnic national origin (including shared ancestry and/or ethnic characteristics), sex, disability, military status (including veteran status), sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, marital status, pregnancy status, genetic information, or any other characteristic protected by law.

Required Reporting

All non-confidential employees, including your faculty members, have a legal requirement to report all relevant details, obtained directly or indirectly, about any incident of discrimination or harassment, including Title IX Prohibited Conduct, to the Office of Access, Compliance, and Community (OACC), which includes the Title IX Coordinator.

Reportable Conduct by an employee, a student, or a third party includes:

- Discrimination and harassment under Title VI or Title VII, which can include unequal and unfavorable treatment in the educational/work environment or conduct (oral, written, graphic) that is physically threatening, harmful, or humiliating.
- Prohibited Conduct under Title IX, which can include sexual harassment, sexual assault, gender-based stalking, or dating/domestic violence.

Upon notification, OACC professionals will assess the report and determine if outreach is required. If outreach is required, the potentially harmed individual (the "Complainant") will receive a communication, likely in the form of an email, with an offer to meet with a representative of the appropriate team.

Applicable Policies and Resources

- University Policy 1201: Non-Discrimination
    - Contact masoneo@gmu.edu with related questions.
- University Policy 1202: Sexual and Gender-Based Harassment and Other Interpersonal Violence
    - Contact titleix@gmu.edu with related questions.
- University Policy 1204: Prohibited Relationships with Students

General questions may be directed to OACC at oacc@gmu.edu, or by phone at 703-993-8730, or in person on the Fairfax campus in Aquia 373 or at Mason Square in Van Metre Hall Suite 222.

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

Code of Student Conduct:

The University Code of Student Conduct is George Mason University's statement of community values. The Code fosters a safe, secure, and fair learning environment by establishing expectations for behavior, identifying a process for resolving incidents outside the stated expectations and the results of such processes**. No student or student organization shall commit an Act of Misconduct in any location**. Students and student organizations found responsible under this CSC of committing Acts of Misconduct are subject to sanctions by the University. The Office of Student Conduct has authority over all non-academic disciplinary matters.

Please refer to the Office of Student Conduct website- https:/studentconduct.gmu.edu

STUDENT RESOURCES

- **The Writing Center:** George Mason has a well-equipped Writing Center where students can access tutoring, writing workshops and helpful online resources. To find out how you can take advantage of the Writing Center, please visit their website at: http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/.

- **Learning Services** provides a variety of experience-based learning opportunities through which students explore a wide range of academic concerns. To learn more about their coaching, skills, and tutoring resources, please visit their website at: https://learningservices.gmu.edu/
- **University Libraries:** Visit the University Libraries website to learn more about their resources: https://library.gmu.edu/ and for online courses: http://library.gmu.edu/distance. The subject matter librarian for Conflict Resolution is Christopher Magee at cmagee@gmu.edu
- **The Office of Military Services** assists veterans, active-duty service members, guardsmen, reservists, and dependents in making a successful transition into the Mason community. For more information, please view their website at: http://military.gmu.edu
- **The Center for Culture, Equity and Empowerment (CCCE, formerly ODIME)** leads the university in creating and sustaining inclusive learning environments where all members of the Mason community are welcomed, valued, and supported. Service areas include student access and equity for first generation and DACA students, student engagement for racial justice, and LGBTQ+ resources and initiatives. For more information, please visit their website at: https://ccee.gmu.edu/
- **Counseling and Psychological Services**: The George Mason University Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) staff consists of professional counseling and clinical psychologists, social workers, and counselors who offer a wide range of services (e.g., individual and group counseling, workshops and outreach programs) to enhance students' personal experience and academic performance. See http://caps.gmu.edu
- **University Calendar:** Details regarding the current Academic Calendar. http://calendar.gmu.edu

Class Schedule

Session 1 - Introduction **– delivered jointly**

THEME – MISSING PERSONS AND CONFLICT – CARTER SCHOOL
Session 2 – Global issues of missing persons and forced disappearance
Session 3 – Trauma, loss and Cycles of violence
Session 4 – Memory, history and politics of the past

THEME – FORENSIC SCIENCE (HUMANITARIAN FORENSIC) – COLLEGE OF SCIENCE FORENSIC PROGRAM
Sesson 5 – Humanitarian Forensics –Intro and Grave site detection (Drones/Sensors, Ground Penetrating Radar and Canines)
Session 6 –Crime Scene Investigation including Volatile Organic Compounds and Recovery of Remains
Session 7 – Identification including Anthropology and Pathology
Session 8 – Identification continued with nuclear DNA/Databases (Namus and CODIS) and Odontology
Session 9 –Identification continued with mitochondrial DNA and Investigative Genetic Genealogy
Session 10 – Identification completion including Facial Approximation and an International law and forensic (guest lecture by international humanitarian law lawyer)

THEME – PEACEBUILDING AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION – CARTER SCHOOL
Session 11 – Working with the families of missing persons
Session 12 – Truth telling and dealing with the past
Session 13 – Missing persons work as confidence building measure
Session 14 – Justice, reconciliation and limitations of forensics
Session 15 – Integration and reflection