International law on the conduct of hostilities regulates and limits the methods and means of warfare used by parties to an armed conflict. It aims to strike a balance between legitimate military action and the humanitarian objective of reducing human suffering, particularly among civilians.

Parties to the conflict MUST...

- distinguish between combatants and civilians and between military objectives and civilian objects (principle of distinction)
- not attack those who are not, or no longer, taking direct part in hostilities (civilians, wounded, sick, shipwrecked, surrendered or captured fighters)
- not attack civilian objects
- not use indiscriminate weapons

- not launch an attack which may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians or damage to civilian objects or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated (principle of proportionality)

- take all feasible precautions in the choice of targets and of means and methods of attack with a view to avoiding, and in any event to minimizing, incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians and damage to civilian objects (principle of precaution)

- not use certain weapons that cause excessive suffering, e.g.:
  - chemical and biological weapons, exploding or expanding bullets, non-detectable fragments or blinding

- not use certain methods of warfare, e.g.:
  - ordering that there shall be no survivors
  - spreading terror among the civilian population
  - taking hostages
  - starving civilians or destroying objects that are indispensable for the survival of the population
  - taking reprisals against protected persons and objects
  - using sexual violence
  - recruiting or using children in armed conflict
  - using human shields