The only legitimate objective of war – independently of the causes fought for – can only be to weaken the military potential of the enemy:

The State fighting in self-defence has only to weaken the military potential of the aggressor sufficiently to preserve its independence; the aggressor has only to weaken the military potential of the defender sufficiently to impose its political will; the governmental forces involved in a non-international armed conflict have only to overcome the armed rebellion and dissident fighters have only to overcome the control of the government of the country (or parts of it) they want to control.

In order to "win the war" it is not necessary to kill all enemy soldiers; it is sufficient to capture them or to make them otherwise surrender. It is not necessary to harm civilians, only combatants. It is not necessary to destroy the enemy country, but only to occupy it. It is not necessary to destroy civilian infrastructure, but only objects contributing to military resistance.

See Military Necessity [1]; Military Advantage [2];
Source URL: https://casebook.icrc.org/glossary/objective-war

Links