“Combatant” describes those persons with a right to directly participate in hostilities between States.

The following persons are combatants in an international armed conflict [1]:

a. Members of the armed forces [2], except medical personnel [3] and religious personnel [4].

b. Members of other militias and members of other volunteer corps, including those of organized resistance movements, belonging to a Party to the conflict, provided that such militias or volunteer corps, including such organized resistance movements, fulfil the following conditions:

1. they are commanded by a person responsible for his subordinates;
2. they wear a fixed distinctive sign recognizable at a distance;
3. they carry their arms openly; and
4. they conduct their operations in accordance with the laws and customs of war.

c. Members of the regular armed forces who profess allegiance to a government or authority not recognized by the other Party to the conflict.

d. Participants in a levée en masse [5].

Combatants are required to distinguish themselves from the civilian population [6] while they are engaged in an attack [7] or in a military operation preparatory to an attack [7].

A combatant who fails to distinguish himself while he is engaged in an attack [7] or in a
military operation preparatory to an attack \footnote{7} loses his combatant status if he is captured, which means he does not have prisoner of war status \footnote{8} and can be tried for an act of war. However, he is to be given protections equivalent in all respects to those provided to prisoners of war \footnote{8} under the third Geneva Convention. Notably, in international armed conflicts governed by Additional Protocol I, a combatant distinguishes himself sufficiently if he carries his arms openly:

\begin{itemize}
  \item a. during each military engagement; and
  \item b. during such time as he is visible to the adversary while engaged in a military deployment preceding the launching of an attack \footnote{7} in which he is to participate.
\end{itemize}

A combatant who falls into the power of an adverse party to the conflict is a prisoner of war \footnote{8}.

See also Unlawful combatants \footnote{9}, Detention \footnote{10}

\begin{table}[h]
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\textbf{DEFINITION} \\
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\textbf{PI, 43/2} \footnote{11} \\
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Members of armed forces

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\textbf{OUTLINE} \\
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Chapter 6, I. Who is a combatant? \footnote{12} \\
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\begin{table}[h]
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\textbf{LEGAL SOURCES} \\
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conditions \\
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members of regular armed forces

members of armed forces to group professing allegiance to non-recognised government, or authorities

members of irregular militia, volunteer corps belonging to a party to a conflict
members of organised armed groups or units responsible to a party to a conflict

PI, 43/1 [11]

members of organised resistance groups

GCI, 13/2 [13] (see ICRC updated Commentary [14])

GCII, 13/2 [15] (see ICRC updated Commentary [16])

GCI, 13/2 [13] (see ICRC updated Commentary [14])

GCII, 13/6 [15] (see ICRC updated Commentary [16])

members of regular armed forces including militias and volunteer corps

PI, 44/6 [18]

levée en masse See levée en masse [5]

GCI, 13/6 [13] (see ICRC updated Commentary [14])

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Unprivileged combatants
See Mercenaries
See Spies

Unlawful combatants
See Unlawful combatants

BIBLIOGRAPHIC RESOURCES

Suggested readings:


Further readings:


**Source URL:** https://casebook.icrc.org/glossary/combatants

**Links**

[1] https://casebook.icrc.org/glossary/international-armed-conflict
[8] https://casebook.icrc.org/glossary/prisoners-war
[10] https://casebook.icrc.org/glossary/detention