

Overview of International Law

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Study guide – concise, organized, and easy to read

1. What Is International Law?

Aspect	Description
Definition	A body of rules, norms, and principles that govern the relations between sovereign states, international organizations, and, increasingly, non-state actors.
Purpose	• Maintain peace and security • Promote human rights and development • Regulate trade, the environment, and the use of force
Sources (Art. 38(1) Statute of the ICJ)	1. Treaties (conventions, agreements) 2. Customary International Law (general and consistent state practice + opinio juris) 3. General Principles of Law (recognised by civilized nations) 4. Judicial Decisions & Scholarly Writings (subsidiary means)
Characteristics	• No global legislature; law emerges from consent and practice • Primarily state-centric, but NGOs, corporations, and individuals increasingly subject to obligations • Enforcement relies on consent, reciprocity, and reputational pressure rather than a single sovereign authority

2. Main Branches

Branch	Core Topics	Key Instruments
Public International Law	State sovereignty, use of force, diplomatic relations, human rights	UN Charter, Geneva Conventions, ICCPR, ICESCR
Private (Transnational) International Law	Cross-border contracts, torts, family law, corporate disputes	Hague Conventions, UNCITRAL Model Law, CISG

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Branch	Core Topics	Key Instruments
International Humanitarian Law (IHL)	Conduct of armed conflict, protection of civilians	1949 Geneva Conventions & Additional Protocols
International Criminal Law (ICL)	War crimes, genocide, crimes against humanity, aggression	Rome Statute (ICC), ad hoc tribunals
International Economic Law	Trade, investment, monetary relations	WTO Agreements, BITs, IMF & World Bank Articles
International Environmental Law	Protection of the environment, climate change	Stockholm, Rio (UNFCCC, Kyoto, Paris), Convention on Biodiversity
Law of the Sea	Maritime zones, navigation, resource exploitation	UNCLOS (1982)
Human Rights Law	Civil, political, economic, social, cultural rights	Universal Declaration of Human Rights, regional conventions (e.g., European Convention on Human Rights)

3. Fundamental Principles

Principle	Meaning	Example
Sovereign Equality	All states have equal legal status, regardless of size or power.	One state cannot unilaterally dictate terms to another without consent.
Non-Intervention	Prohibition of coercive interference in the internal affairs of another state.	No military invasion without UN Security Council authorization.
Peaceful Settlement of Disputes	States must resolve conflicts by negotiation, mediation, arbitration, or adjudication.	ICJ cases, WTO dispute settlement panel.
Prohibition of the Use of Force	Force may be used only in self-defence or with UN Security Council authorization.	NATO's intervention in Kosovo (controversial) vs. 1991 Gulf War (UN-approved).

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Principle	Meaning	Example
Self-Determination	Peoples have the right to freely determine political status and pursue economic, social, and cultural development.	Decolonisation processes after WWII.
Humanitarian Protection	Parties to conflict must protect civilians and those hors de	