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Autonomous Weapons: Should AI Be Allowed to Decide Life and Death?

The rise of killer robots is no longer science fiction. It is not something reserved for movies or distant futures. It is unfolding right now, in real conflicts, in real places, with real consequences.

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Introduction

Picture this: you're at a market. You walk around casually, talking with friends and purchasing food. Suddenly you hear a buzzing sound above you. You look up to see a drone hovering over the crowd.

No one is in a control room guiding it. No human is assessing the situation below. There is no pilot. There is just…. technology. Programming.

The programming surveils the market analysing faces, movement, and patterns. Determining who is a threat and who isn't. In milliseconds, it decides your fate. Not a person. But a…. computer program.

For most of these victims life became death in an instant. Due to decision made by…. robot

Machine-Led weapons don't discriminate against their targets. Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems, also known has LAWS, are designed to detect, identify and engage targets without human involvement. Drones require a person to control the system to fire on a target. These weapons don't. LAWS use AI, sensors, and data fed to them in real-time to analyze and make decisions.

> ***"The emergence of these technologies would represent the complete automation of lethal harm, which AI experts fear would mark a third revolution in warfare, following gunpowder and nuclear weapons."***

Technology Overview: What are Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS)?

So what makes these systems autonomous? Machine learning algorithms trained to interpret the data they collect. Cameras, radar, thermal imaging are some of the sensors that could feed data about our surroundings to the system. The software then determines if that person or object is a potential target.

A visualization of a Lethal Autonomous Weapon System (LAWS) during an operation.

Figure 1: A conceptual visualization of a Lethal Autonomous Weapon System (LAWS) during an operation, highlighting the tension between 'meaningful human control' and algorithmic targeting. ***Credit:*** *Gemini AI / VEAA Archive. (Author). CC-BY-NC 4.0.Key Findings & Impact*

Imagine waking up to news that an AI-assisted drone strike in Iraq killed dozens of civilians. This kill happened in 2024. These weapons base their actions on data. Garbage in, garbage out.

We've seen this happen before. Many of us learned in history that when it comes to life and death, we should not allow machines to be the judge of that. In 1988 the USS Vincennes shot down a commercial airplane based on it's devices alerting the crew there was an attack.. Sad thing is the crew thought the data was real because they were under stress.

The 2020 Wagner war is claimed to be the first war where a Turkish-made Kargu-2 drone hunted down retreating soldiers on its own. It received no command to attack the soldiers. There was no confirmation needed for it to hunt. No human pushed the button.

These are some of the first instances we know of where an autonomous weapon attacked human without anyone having to give the command to do so.

Israel has used AI technology during it's war on Gaza. They deployed "smart" systems known as Gospel and Lavender. These systems selected who would be bombed and when. Trouble is these

weapons couldn't distinguish between military personnel and civilians. Hundreds of innocent lives were lost because of it.

We call these autonomous machines "smart". But what makes them smart is programmed into them. They're only as good as the information they're fed to train them. Meaning these "smart" weapons could be programmed to discriminate against people of a certain race instantly.

LAWS are killing people as we speak. And they won't stop anytime soon. If we don't act now, when? These autonomous weapons are happening now. Technology advances every day and to be quite frank, the law is not moving nearly fast enough to regulate it.

What's Next? The machines are already here!

Who's to blame when a computer making decisions for one of these machines gets it wrong? The person who programmed it? The person who wrote the code that created the machine? It's messed up doesn't begin to cover it.

Many countries have these projects underway. Billions of dollars are being poured into these technologies.. Sure In theory it makes sense. Machines don't get bored of doing a task thousands of times. They can process information quickly. Machines can make decisions in an instant.

Unlike us they don't feel nervous. Machines don't panic. When something goes wrong technicians will jump into action to fix the problem not robots freezing on the spot.

Some may argue these autonomous weapons may decrease how horrible war is. They could be more precise and prevent mistakes. But if its easier to go to war because your frightened of robots taking yours.. Doesn't that make it easier to start a war?

We are at the fence. The fence of where life and death should be decided.

A world trying to catch up

The world is not oblivious to these machines. In fact the entire world except for us is talking about it. We are literally running out of time.

There have been talks for years about how we can prevent these weapons from getting out of hand. Before we even dive into that.. There's one major principle that comes with these conversations.

The idea that there needs to be meaningful human control over these weapons.

Meaning someone needs to be in the loop and involved with the decision to use force. It's quite simple when you think about it. Humans should be making the call. The problem is its not as simple as that. This isn't a universal agreement.

Some nations believe banning these techs would be detrimental and put them at a disadvantage should war occur.

We are the common people in this story. Humans will have to make a decision. The decision of if we want a machine telling us when we live and die. Or if that is something we should decide for ourselves.

The decision we make now will shape the future of warfare for generations to come. But more importantly than that. It will shape…

Your kids future.

The more we delay for a decision to be made about these autonomous drones. The closer we are getting to a point where we won't have a choice in the matter.

So make a choice. Let's decide as a whole before the machines do.

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