
Targeting people and digital dehumanisation



WWW.AUTOMATEDRESEARCH.ORG
INFO@AUTOMATEDRESEARCH.ORG
@AUTOMATEDDR

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Among the many serious risks and challenges presented by autonomous weapons, a central issue in international discussions on the topic is the need for a prohibition on autonomous weapons systems that target people.¹ The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) describes autonomous weapons systems as ‘systems which select and apply force to targets without human intervention’, wherein ‘after initial activation or launch by a person, an autonomous weapon system self-initiates or triggers a strike in response to information from the environment received through sensors and on the basis of a generalized “target profile”.’² This means that the specific object to be attacked, and the exact time and place of the attack, are determined by sensor processing, not by humans.

Autonomous weapons are ‘qualitatively different to other weapons systems’, because ‘if such systems are used against people, this entails individuals being sensed, processed and targeted as patterns of data and objects by machines.’³ The kind of information that an autonomous weapon uses to select and engage a target depends on the types of sensors it uses, and what information those sensors collect. Autonomous

weapons use the information that they get from sensors and fit this information against a generalised target profile. If the information that the weapons system gets from the sensors does not fit its target profile, then it does not use force. However, if the information that the weapons system gets from these sensors matches the pre-programmed target profile, the weapons system will then use force against a target. That target could be a person or a car, for example, depending on the target profile that the weapon uses. What this means is that an algorithm makes the decision for the machine to use force and to engage a target based on the data that it gets from sensors, instead of a human (such as a soldier) making this decision.⁴ Further, and as the ICRC has pointed out, this means that ‘it is the vehicle or the victim that triggers the strike, not the user.’⁵

As such, the ICRC has stated in their position on autonomous weapons that ‘...use of autonomous weapon systems to target human beings should be ruled out. This would best be achieved through a prohibition on autonomous weapon systems that are designed or used

1 For more on the issues raised by autonomous weapons, see e.g.: Stop Killer Robots, ‘Problems with autonomous weapons.’ Available at: <https://www.stopkillerrobots.org/stop-killer-robots/facts-about-autonomous-weapons/>;

2 International Committee of the Red Cross (2021), ICRC position on autonomous weapons systems. Available at: <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-position-autonomous-weapon-systems>

3 Elizabeth Minor (2023), Laws for LAWS: Towards a treaty to regulate lethal autonomous weapons. Available at: <https://article36.org/updates/new-fesny-publication-laws-for-laws/>

4 For more on sensor-based targeting systems and target profiles, see: Article 36 (2021), Sensor-based targeting systems: an option for regulation. Available at: (<https://article36.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Sensor-based-targeting.pdf>); and Article 36 (2019), Target profiles. Available at: <https://article36.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Target-profiles.pdf>

5 International Committee of the Red Cross (2022), What you need to know about autonomous weapons. Available at: <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/what-you-need-know-about-autonomous-weapons>

to apply force against persons.⁶ A number of states participating in discussions on autonomous weapons at meetings of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) Group of Governmental Experts on emerging technologies in the area of lethal autonomous weapon systems (GGE on LAWS) have also proposed prohibitions on systems designed or used to target humans, including Austria⁷ and Palestine.⁸ Similarly, numerous states have expressed their concerns regarding the ethical issues raised by the use of autonomous weapons systems, including issues such as bias, discrimination and the violation of human dignity⁹, as well as expressing the need for systems to remain within human control.¹⁰

Purporting to be able to distinguish between combatants and civilians, between active combatants and those hors de combat, or between civilians and civilians directly participating in hostilities, on the basis of data acquired by sensors and processed and classified by algorithms raises serious legal, ethical and moral concerns, including concerns around the violation of human dignity and of dehumanisation.¹¹ The targeting of people by autonomous weapons systems is an example of violent digital dehumanisation. In the context of autonomous weapons, digital dehumanisation - the process whereby humans are

reduced to data, which is then used to make decisions and/or take actions that negatively affect their lives - deprives people of dignity, demeans individuals' humanity, and removes or replaces human involvement or responsibility in the use of force through the use of automated decision-making processes.¹²

The digital dehumanisation that results from reducing people to data points based on specific characteristics raises serious questions about how the target profiles of autonomous weapons are created, and what pre-existing data these target profiles are based on. It also raises questions about how the user can understand what falls into a weapon's target profile, and why the weapons system applied force.¹³ Given the digital dehumanisation inherent in such systems, as well as the other significant moral, ethical and legal issues raised by such systems, autonomous weapons systems that target people should be prohibited.¹⁴ States should ensure that a new legal instrument on autonomous weapons systems includes a prohibition on systems which use sensors to target humans directly, as well as a prohibition on systems which cannot be used with meaningful human control, and positive obligations to ensure meaningful human control in all other systems.¹⁵

6 International Committee of the Red Cross (2021), ICRC position on autonomous weapons systems. Available at: <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-position-autonomous-weapon-systems>

7 See: Austria (2023), Revised working paper, submitted to the CCW GGE on LAWS. Available at: https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/ccw/2023/gge/documents/Austria_March2023.pdf

8 See: State of Palestine (2023), State of Palestine's Proposal for the Normative and Operational Framework on Autonomous Weapons Systems, submitted to the CCW GGE on LAWS. Available at: <https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/ccw/2023/gge/documents/WP2.pdf>

9 See: Automated Decision Research, State Positions Monitor. Available at: <https://automatedresearch.org/state-positions/>

10 On human control, see: Automated Decision Research (2023), Convergences in state positions on human control. Available at: <https://automatedresearch.org/news/report/convergences-in-state-positions-on-human-control/>

11 There are also concerns around the impact of autonomous weapons on civilian persons with disabilities, including the ability of a system to 'make the nuanced determination as to whether an assistive device qualifies a person with disabilities as a threat.' See: United Nations General Assembly (2021), 'Rights of persons with disabilities: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, Gerard Quinn'. Available at: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/196/98/PDF/N2119698.pdf?OpenElement>. See also: M. Díaz Figueroa, A. Henaó Orozco, J. Martínez and W. Muñoz Jaime (2022), 'The risks of autonomous weapons: An analysis centred on the rights of persons with disabilities', International Review of the Red Cross, No.922. Available at: https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/the-risks-of-autonomous-weapons-analysis-centred-on-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-922#footnote10_44mb2gb

12 Automated Decision Research (2022), Autonomous weapons and digital dehumanisation. Available at: <https://automatedresearch.org/news/report/autonomous-weapons-and-digital-dehumanisation-a-short-explainer-paper/>

13 For more on sensor-based targeting systems and target profiles, see: Article 36 (2021), Sensor-based targeting systems: an option for regulation. Available at: (<https://article36.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Sensor-based-targeting.pdf>); and Article 36 (2019), Target profiles. Available at: <https://article36.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Target-profiles.pdf>

14 See: Stop Killer Robots (2021). Stopping Killer Robots: A guide for policymakers. Available at: <https://www.stopkillerrobots.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/211123-A-Guide-for-Policy-Makers-WEB.pdf>; International Committee of the Red Cross (2021), ICRC position on autonomous weapons systems. Available at: <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/icrc-position-autonomous-weapon-systems>

15 See: Stop Killer Robots, 'Our policy position'. Available at: <https://www.stopkillerrobots.org/our-policies/>