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For 50 years, there has been a playbook for counterinsurgency campaigns. Implemented in varying ways by the British in Northern Ireland, white Rhodesians in what is now Zimbabwe, Americans in Vietnam, and the US and its allies in Afghanistan and Iraq, the playbook advised: embarking on development projects that would reward loyalists; co-opting some of the subject population as allies and informers against the rest; sending soldiers on patrol so that they would draw insurgent fire and bait the insurgents into revealing themselves; and using signals and human intelligence to identify suspected insurgents who could then be captured or killed, often in middle-of-the night raids on their homes.¹

These tactics tended to produce bloody stalemate rather than victory. (Referencing their never-ending quality, Israelis referred to their own protracted counterinsurgency campaign against Palestinians as 'mowing the grass'.) And they involved the deployment of troops from the metropole, some of whom were inevitably killed, thus undermining support for counterinsurgency at home.

After Hamas killed 1,200 Israelis, mostly civilians, on 7 October 2023, Israel launched a new kind of counterinsurgency campaign in Gaza grounded in AI and algorithmic calculations. Building on the logic of drone warfare (Gusterson 2016), this new approach makes counterinsurgency more distanced and more focused on statistics than sentiment; instead of seeking to balance the killing of insurgents with winning the hearts and minds of the subject population, it simply mobilizes algorithmic technique to decimate resistance from afar. This campaign is, from the point of view of 'just war' ethics and the laws of war, deeply troubling.² Given Israeli national security links with the US and Western European apparatus, its techniques are likely to proliferate unless robustly condemned, which is one reason for writing about it now. Some Israeli officers, troubled by the new tactics, took the risk of sharing their concerns with investigative journalist Yuval Abraham at +972 Magazine.

His resulting exposé reveals that an AI program called Lavender has been central to the Israeli campaign. According to Abraham (2024), Lavender picks targets for assassination in the same way ChatGPT learns to write prose.

The machine gives almost every single person in Gaza a rating from 1 to 100, expressing how likely it is that they are a militant. Lavender learns to identify characteristics of known Hamas and PIJ [Palestinian Islamic Jihad] operatives, whose information was fed to the machine as training data, and then to locate these same characteristics ... among the general population ... An individual found to have several different incriminating features will reach a high rating, and thus automatically becomes a potential target for assassination.

To assign each Gazan a score between 1 and 100,

the Lavender software analyzes information collected on most of the 2.3 million residents of the Gaza Strip through a system of mass surveillance, then assesses and ranks the likelihood that each particular person is active in the military wing of Hamas ... [There are] features that can increase an individual's rating, such as being in a Whatsapp group with a known militant, changing cell phone every few months, and changing addresses frequently.

Abraham says 37,000 Gazans have been put on death lists this way. Before the war, US and Israeli military intelligence estimated Hamas's military numbers at 25-30,000 people (McKernan & Davies 2024). According to his informants in the Israeli military, if the military complains it is running

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1. A literature has emerged on the counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. See Chandrasekaran 2006; Gopal 2014; Jamail 2007; Kaplan 2013; Kilcullen 2010; Klaidman 2012; Mazetti 2013; Stack 2010; United States Army 2007.

2. Recently, Michael Walzer (1977: 2024), the foundational theorist of modern just war and a long-time ally of Israel, has condemned these tactics.

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short of targets, the sensitivity of Lavender can be adjusted to generate more.

Once put on a target list, the person to be killed must then be located. The easiest way to do this is to drop a bomb on them when they are home with their families – a tactic at odds with the supposed precision of Lavender, especially since the bombs routinely used are so-called ‘dumb bombs’ rather than more precise weapons. This manoeuvre is facilitated by a software program called ‘where’s Daddy?’ and regulated by an algorithm that allows the killing of 15-20 innocent civilians for each low-level Hamas operative killed and up to 100 for each high-level Hamas operative. (For comparison, the US military decided it was acceptable to kill 30 innocent civilians as the price of killing Osama bin Laden.) In the words of one Israeli officer reflecting on the consequences of this algorithm, ‘Absurdly, it turned out most of the people you killed were women and children’ (ibid.).

The *New York Times* (Frenkel 2024) also reports that, despite the widely recognized inaccuracies of the technology, the Israeli military uses a facial recognition program developed by the company Corsage to match the faces of Hamas operatives in the 7 October attacks with Palestinians encountered by Israeli soldiers at checkpoints (Harwell 2019). Facial recognition technology is unreliable enough that over 20 US jurisdictions have banned local police from using it (MacMillan et al. 2024).

In our co-edited book on the anthropology of algorithms (Besteman & Gusterson 2019), contributors were troubled by the use of algorithmic logic and unquestioned pseudo numbers to make life-altering decisions – from determining which homeowners would lose their houses in the 2008 financial crisis to evaluating teachers, sentencing criminals and allocating government aid.

Once put on a target list, the person to be killed must then be located. Drawing on their critiques, we can analyse four ways Lavender fundamentally transforms warfare, reducing life-and-death decisions to automated calculations, much as credit scores mechanically predict loan defaults. The dangers of this automation reveal themselves in stages – from initial problems with parameters through systematic errors and declining oversight, until human responsibility itself dissolves.

Lavender’s flaws begin with its definitional boundary work, its **parameters**. In her essay on governmental statistics for *Life by algorithms*, Sally Merry (2019: 146) observes: ‘Any system of counting requires substantial interpretive work in deciding what to count, how to categorize it, and what to call what is measured’. When Lavender was, at initiation, fed a list of Hamas operatives, where were the boundaries set on such people (bearing in mind that many Gazans who did not much like Hamas pledged allegiance to it so they could get ahead, just as many Russians did with the Communist Party during the Cold War)? One Israeli officer said, ‘I was bothered by the fact that when Lavender was trained, they used the term “Hamas operative” loosely, and included people who were civil defense workers’ (Abraham 2024). And, once every Gazan was assigned a score, where was the boundary set between Hamas and non-Hamas? One Israeli officer told Abraham,

The numbers changed all the time because it depends on where you set the bar of what a Hamas operative is. There were times when a Hamas operative was defined more broadly, and then the machine started bringing us all kinds of civil defence personnel, police officers, on whom it would be a shame to waste bombs.

The system then makes **matching mistakes** as it builds on these compromised foundations. According to the Israeli military, Lavender makes ‘errors’ in 10 per cent of cases, though dissenting officers believe the error rate is higher. The system then flags individuals with similar communication patterns to those in its flawed database. Officers documented many misidentifications: some targets turned out to be police or civil defence workers; others were simply relatives of militants or

people who happened to share a name with an operative. Some were flagged just for using a hand-me-down phone. They point out that ‘Palestinians change phones all the time’, yet Israel treats the phone as a key vector of identification. With such systemic flaws, one might expect increased human oversight – instead, the opposite occurred.

As errors mounted, human oversight diminished. In earlier Israeli military campaigns, considerable human resources were invested in checking the details of Palestinians added to target lists. Official Israeli statements give the impression that, likewise, a lot of human labour goes into reviewing Lavender’s decisions. However, Israeli officers told Abraham that they soon learned to spend about 20 seconds signing off on each target – mainly to make sure they were male. Individuals described an inexorable process of **slippage** both in their own rigour as targeters and in targeting standards, engineered from above, when targets were in short supply. In a situation where Lavender sustained its proclamations with deceptively objective pseudo numbers, its simulated world increasingly substituted for the real world. ‘Sources said that if Lavender decided an individual was a militant in Hamas, they were essentially asked to treat that as an order, with no requirement to independently check why the machine made that choice or to examine the raw intelligence data on which it is based’ (Abraham 2024).

This, finally, led to an **erosion of responsibility**. Abraham says a decree from Lavender was treated ‘as if it were a human decision’, and humans became ‘rubber stamps’ – the opposite of what we would want. This produced a psychology of passive abjection among military targeters, but it also raises troubling questions of legal responsibility. If Israel is determined in the future to have committed war crimes in Gaza, who – or what – will be responsible? Will Israeli soldiers be able to plead they were ‘just following orders’ from a computer program? The implementation of Lavender inexorably leads towards abdication of human moral agency when what we need, if a society undertaking counterinsurgency is to be able to look itself in the mirror, is the assumption of moral responsibility.

This algorithmic targeting system presents us with a paradox. If Lavender functions as claimed (and we should note that it is unclear to what degree it continues to guide current military actions), its very existence suggests a concern with discrimination in targeting that seems at odds with the scale of civilian casualties in Gaza. Yet the program’s operation – with its adjustable thresholds and high ‘acceptable’ civilian casualty ratios – reveals how algorithmic systems can provide a veneer of precision while enabling mass casualties.

Michael Herzfeld (1992) shows us how bureaucracies can both recognize and deny moral obligations at once – exactly what we see with Lavender. Its veneer of careful targeting gives military actions a stamp of legitimacy, even as its flexible rules and casualty allowances enable widespread killing. Given systematic attacks on civilian infrastructure – including hospitals, schools, bakeries, and water facilities – Lavender’s targeting logic appears less as a constraint on violence and more as a technical means of facilitating its expansion. Through this technological framework, precision targeting becomes a means of justifying operations that result in widespread civilian deaths.

The implications of this erosion of human judgement extend beyond Gaza. The former fighter pilot turned systems engineer Mary Cummings (2004) warns that automated weapon interfaces create ‘moral buffers’ – psychological distance between operators and lethal decisions. With Lavender, the algorithmic interface buffers operators from the consequences of their actions and transforms killing into a mere data processing task, completed in seconds.

What begins in Gaza – this fusion of AI and killing – will spread to other conflicts unless we act decisively. Anthropologists cannot remain silent while AI systems redefine warfare. ●