

INTERFAITH DECLARATION

IN SUPPORT OF A BAN ON FULLY AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS

The issue

Throughout history, people have been killed by gunfire, maimed by mines and have experienced the devastating effects of bombs. The nature of war continues to change. Now, technology is changing not only how war is fought, but the very identity of who fights it. States are developing machines into fully autonomous weapons (so called killer robots) with the ability to select and engage targets without human intervention, allowing life and death decisions to be made by machines. A decision with such grave consequences should never be made by a machine. Robotic warfare is an affront to human dignity and to the sacredness of life.

Although fully autonomous weapons do not yet exist, military and policy documents indicate a clear trend towards autonomously functioning weapon systems. This development poses a grave threat to civilians in conflict areas and raises serious moral, ethical and legal concerns.

Our objections

Contemporary warfare is no longer fought on conventional battlefields and often takes place in populated areas. Fully autonomous weapons will be unable to distinguish properly between combatants and civilians, neither will they understand human motives and intentions. In the complex and dynamic circumstances of a battlefield fully autonomous weapons will not be able to make sound judgments. Therefore, fully autonomous weapons will pose a serious threat to civilians in conflict and will pose a fundamental challenge to international humanitarian law, particularly regarding the rules of distinction and proportionality.

Given the nature of fully autonomous weapons, it is inevitable that they will at some point kill or injure civilians. When that happens, it seems that no one can be held accountable. The weapon itself has no moral agency and, as a result, cannot be held responsible if they take an innocent life. A robot does not feel guilt or regret, you cannot put it in prison or hold it accountable for its actions. But also the programmer, the manufacturer or the military commander cannot be held legally responsible for crimes committed by an autonomously functioning weapon. This accountability gap should be considered immoral and abhorrent.

Autonomous weapons will make it easier for leaders to go to war, because they will shift risks away from a nation's own soldiers. However, due to the nature of fully autonomous weapons the risk of civilian casualties will increase.

Our commitment

On 28 April 2013, an international coalition of non-governmental organizations launched the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots to raise awareness about the implications of fully autonomous weapons and to call for a comprehensive, pre-emptive ban on fully autonomous weapons. Whereas other weapons were only banned after their use showed to have grave humanitarian consequences, we now have a chance to stop these atrocious weapons before they enter the battlefield. Similar to the development of the nuclear weapon, fully autonomous weapons will be a weapon we will wish we had prevented. In the past, religious leaders showed their commitment to take action against other heinous weapons such as cluster munitions and anti-personnel mines. Now, it is time to take a stand against fully autonomous weapons. Therefore,

we, as religious leaders, faith groups and faith-based organizations, raise our collective voice to call on all governments to participate in the international debate on the issue, and to work towards a ban on the development, production and use of fully autonomous weapons.

This is a chance for all involved to take a stand, to uphold human dignity, and to promote peace.