

Israel is pioneering new methods of genocide

Killing by algorithm

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Israel is making sure it will be remembered in history as a pioneer of genocide. Multiple Israeli military sources have testified that the Israeli military is using AI to guide missile and bomb strikes against Palestinians¹. If the Israeli military's Artificial Intelligence determines that a person is a military member of Hamas, the Israeli military will systematically approve of a missile or bomb strike to murder that person and any civilians in the immediate vicinity.

The AI program used by the IDF, called 'Lavender,' can also determine the likely number of civilians who will be killed by a strike. It has been Israeli policy to approve of strikes that they estimate would kill up to 15 or 20 civilians for every low-level Hamas member, and kill over 100 civilians for every high-ranking Hamas member.

How accurate is the program? According to the Israeli government itself, Lavender has a 90% accuracy. However, the Israeli government is an objectively disreputable source that frequently gives misinformation to the media. But even according to their own claims, 10 supposed high-ranking Hamas members identified by Lavender could result in the killing of 1000 civilians. Statistically, one strike out of ten would be a case of mistaken identity, so the 100 civilians killed in that strike would be a "mistake". And the 900 civilians killed in strikes against 9 actual Hamas leaders would be, according to Israel, justified collateral. Hamas, in its October 7 attack, showed who they were when they killed and assaulted a large amount of noncombatants, but even they were less calloused than the IDF.

But the idea that Lavender is 90% accurate is contradicted by Israel's own intelligence reports. Just before the invasion of Gaza, Israeli and US intelligence both estimated the Hamas military wing to consist of 25-30,000 people. And yet Lavender has identified 37,000 low-level Hamas members, according to sources, suggesting it may have generated well over 12,000 false identifications.

We know that this kind of AI program works through association. In this case, guilt by association. The targets aren't identified because they are armed and carrying out attacks against Israeli forces. They are identified because they are surveilled associating with those who have already been identified as Hamas.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/03/israel-gaza-ai-database-hamas-airstrikes>

We also know that AI tends to be racist², and it tends to be much less accurate in identifying racialized people. And Israeli sources admitted that they would usually spend only a few seconds to rubber stamp each attack request coming from Lavender. In other words, the computer would claim some young Palestinian was a member of Hamas, because someone he was seen talking to had been identified as a Hamas member. Drone surveillance would follow him back to his house, where the computer registered 15 other people, from grandmothers to babies, as also residing in that moment. The computer would ask permission to authorize a strike. An Israeli would look at a few images of surveillance footage and the strike location, and give the go-ahead. Shortly thereafter, a jet would drop a bomb or a drone would fire a missile. Everyone in the house would be murdered, 16 dead. And the single target would, maybe, be a member of Hamas.

This is not a dramatized or exaggerated example. One Israeli intelligence source admitted that they preferred killing Palestinian militants in their homes, together with their families, rather than to attack military command posts. “It’s much easier to bomb a family’s home. The system is built to look for them in these situations.” They also admit that many times they would kill more civilians than they were allowed to according to their own horrific limits, because they would not know exactly how many people were in a house. What’s more, attacking low-level Hamas targets (and in many cases, people who were wrongly suspected of being Hamas members) led to more civilian casualties, because the IDF tended to save their precision missiles for “high-value targets” and use massive bombs instead, which were more destructive, less accurate, but—the most important consideration for the Israeli military—cheaper.

The Israeli government has a longstanding practice of targeting entire families. Recently, they killed three children and several grandchildren³ of a Hamas leader living overseas, claiming a Hamas member was in the household. In total, Israel has killed 60 members of Ismail Haniyeh’s family, including 14 people in one bomb attack against the family home. The strike targeting his children and grandchildren came as they were traveling to celebrate the Eid religious holiday.

Another longstanding Israeli practice is to weaponize humanitarian assistance or deny aid. This was thrown into relief on April 1 when they deliberately targeted an aid convoy in Gaza, shooting precision missiles at one vehicle after another and killing 7 foreign volunteers. On February 29, Israeli troops opened fire on an aid distribution site, killing 100 Palestinians seeking food for their families, and injuring 700. Throughout the invasion of Gaza, around 200 aid workers have been killed.

Meanwhile, Israeli settlers in the West Bank are itching to get in on the violence. They have attacked and burned down hundreds of homes⁴ in dozens of villages, killing several Palestinians and sending dozens more to the hospital with bullet wounds. Israeli troops and paramilitaries have killed over 460 Palestinians in the West Bank since this latest war began.

It doesn’t stop there: at the beginning of April, the Israeli government granted itself the right to ban foreign media outlets⁵ like al-Jazeera. Israeli forces have arrested, assaulted, and murdered multiple al Jazeera journalists over the course of the invasion of Gaza. This was also a frequent practice by the United States during its occupation of Iraq.

² <https://www.media.mit.edu/articles/artificial-intelligence-has-a-problem-with-gender-and-racial-bias>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/10/gaza-hamas-israel-ismail-haniyeh-sons-killed>

⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/13/palestinian-man-killed-in-israeli-settler-raids-in-occupied>

⁵ <https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/01/middleeast/israel-al-jazeera-media-law-intl-hnk/index.html>

The same day, April 1, Israel bombed the Iranian consulate in Damascus, Syria⁶. Though it is clear that human rights and international law constitute a failed system (with Israel, the United States, and the former Soviet Union and now Russia being the countries most in breach of international law since 1945), it is a system that governments and journalistic organizations around the world are explicitly committed to upholding. According to international law, an attack on a country's embassy or consulate is considered an attack on that country's territory. This moment is a useful lens for seeing the hypocrisy of governments and media as they try to contort what was objectively a violation of the system they claim to believe in.

Though I do not think Hamas is an organization anyone should support, given their use of torture, sexual violence, and the authoritarian world they are fighting for, there are some important points of context everyone should consider. Hamas has committed far fewer human rights violations than the governments of Israel, the US, the UK, Russia, China... They won the last elections that could be held in Palestine. They received clandestine support from the Israeli military, who believed they could improve their image if their enemy were reactionary fundamentalists rather than an internationalist anticolonial movement. And Israel has permanently invaded and occupied Palestine. A Palestine ruled by Hamas would be authoritarian, and many Palestinians—based on their gender, their sexuality, their religious and political beliefs—would neither be safe or free. But making that criticism without denouncing Israel as a genocidal state is hypocritical, since the level of Israeli violence is far greater.

As an anarchist I believe that not only do the ends not justify the means, but that it is delusional to think we can ever even separate ends and means. Regardless, everyone needs to accept the reality of the situation:

Everything that Palestinians do against the state of Israel and Israeli settlers, they do in a context of self-defense. They do it in a context of survival.

The historical context:

Israel was founded in 1948 in the Nakba, an organized act of ethnic cleansing that stole 78% of Palestinian lands, forced 750,000 people out of their homes (mostly Muslim Arabs but also many Christians and Musta'arabim or Palestinian Jews), and killed at least 15,000 and possibly many more. Even if one were able to forgive and accept the atrocities of 1948, in the last half century Israel has turned Gaza into an open air refugee camp while continuing to steal more Palestinian lands in the West Bank. Many of the half a million illegal Israeli settlers in the West Bank are organized into highly armed paramilitary groups, on average they are extremely racist, and they kill a large number of Palestinians every year. (In 2023, by mid-September, it's estimated that Israeli settlers or soldiers working in concert with settlers had killed 189 Palestinians in their own homes in the West Bank, and wounded 8,192.)⁷ Settlers also systematically destroy Palestinian fields and olive orchards, deliberately trying to undermine their ability to feed themselves.

In 6 months, the Israeli war on Gaza has killed 33,600 Palestinians and wounded over 76,200, while pushing a million into conditions of starvation. The vast majority of the killed and wounded have been noncombatants. However, I don't want to overemphasize the fact that most of the dead and wounded are unarmed civilians. Palestinians in Gaza and in the West Bank have every ethical right to shoot back at Israeli invaders.

⁶ <https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/02/middleeast/iran-response-israel-damascus-consulate-attack-intl-hnk/index.html>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/oct/21/gaza-palestinians-west-bank-violence-attacks-israel>

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