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Dear Professor Bishp and colleagues,

Thank you for your letter dated 12 April regarding Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS). The Prime Minister has asked me to reply on behalf of the Government.

Let me begin by reassuring you that the UK does not possess fully autonomous weapon systems and has no intention of developing or acquiring them. There has been no shift in the position set out by Lord Astor in 2013: the UK Government is clear that the operation of our weapons will always be under human control as an absolute guarantee of human oversight, authority and accountability for their use.

Turning to the international situation and your concerns about the development of these capabilities by other states and non-state actors, the UK Government's assessment is that fully autonomous systems do not yet exist and are not likely to do so for many years, if at all. In that context, and notwithstanding the UK's clear commitment not to develop lethal fully autonomous weapons systems, at present we do not support the need for a new international treaty to prohibit LAWS.

Firstly, we believe that existing international humanitarian law (IHL) is sufficient in assessing whether any future weapon system would be capable of legal use, and in regulating the use of all weapons including LAWS. The UK conducts reviews of all new weapons, methods or means of warfare as mandated by Article 36 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Convention, to which the UK is party. Some states, while not party to this protocol, also conduct such reviews. We believe that the international discussion on LAWS should focus on increasing compliance with IHL due to its broad applicability, rather than negotiating a new treaty narrowly focussed on LAWS. Furthermore, we are concerned that such a treaty could undermine IHL by only applying to a very narrow set of specific weapons, thus implying that current IHL is inadequate. Your reference to non-state actors and repressive regimes further highlights the need to better implement and enforce current existing IHL. We must be realistic that those who already refuse to abide by existing rules are unlikely to respect any new regulation. While we may differ in our views on a pre-emptive ban, I hope you agree that encouraging greater compliance with existing laws has obvious merit.

Secondly, we believe that there could be legitimate non-lethal advantages to using some forms of increasingly autonomous technology. To legislate against LAWS now, without a clear understanding of the potential opportunities as well as dangers of a technology, would risk leading to the use of counter-productive and generalised language that would stifle research and deprive the UK of significant developments for non-lethal purposes.

Finally, we believe that it is too soon to ban something we simply cannot define. For example, the recent UN Informal Meeting of Experts highlighted the discrepancy in views over whether a prohibition would include existing highly-automated systems. Further discussion is needed to reach consensus on a working definition of LAWS before substantive progress can be made.

The UK Government will continue to engage constructively on this important issue and in particular looks forward to the further discussion of LAWS at the Convention on Conventional Weapons Review Conference in December.

Yours sincerely,
Michael Fallon

THE RT HON MICHAEL FALLON MP