

Artificial Intelligence: a danger to mankind, or the key to a better world?

Siri, Alexa and Cortana are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to Artificial Intelligence (or A.I.), which is playing an increasingly pervasive role in our lives.

In the background, AI is being used in a huge range of settings, from helping to land a plane, to getting a parcel to you more quickly, and deciding whether you get a job interview.

But there are growing concerns that these powerful technologies pose equally powerful dangers, even posing an existential threat to humanity itself.

Some legislators and technologists are worried that so-called “general AI” – or machine-based intelligence that resembles basic human intelligence – could develop superintelligence capabilities at an exponential rate, escaping human control, with untold consequences for mankind.

On 11 September, UNESCO, the UN’s Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, hosted a roundtable discussion entitled “[Artificial Intelligence: Reflection on its Complexity and Impact on Society](#)”, featuring experts from academia and industry.

The talk was hosted by Peter-Paul Verbeek, [PRON FAIR-BAKE] a Philosophy Professor at Twente University in the Netherlands, and a member of UNESCO’s World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology ([COMEST](#)).

Economy and living standards of Gaza ‘eviscerated’ by crippling blockade – UN trade and development report

The Occupied Palestinian Territory now suffers the highest unemployment rate in the world, with incomes and agricultural production going down, the United Nations trade and development agency said on Wednesday, noting that women and young people were worst affected, as the Israeli occupation continues.

“With the blockade now in its eleventh year, the Gaza Strip has been reduced to a humanitarian case of profound suffering and aid dependency,” said the [UN](#)

[Conference on Trade and Development](#) (UNCTAD), in a [news release](#) announcing its findings.

“The productive capacity of Gaza has been eviscerated by three major military operations and a crippling air, sea and land blockade,” it added.

In its [report](#) on [assistance](#) to the Palestinian people, the UN agency also warned of poor growth prospects due to lessening donor support; a freeze in the reconstruction of Gaza; and unsustainable, credit-financed public and private consumption.

It also noted that the longstanding electricity crisis in Gaza worsened with households receiving, on average, two hours of electricity a day in early 2018 and power shortages seriously impacting everyday life and interrupting the delivery of basic services.

“The enduring deprivation of basic economic, social and human rights inflicts a heavy toll on Gaza’s psychological and social fabric, as manifested by the widespread incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder and high suicide rates,” said UNCTAD, noting that in 2017, 225,000 children – more than 10 per cent of the total population – required psychosocial support.

The report also noted that construction of settlements accelerated in 2017 and early 2018 and highlighted evidence of “incremental annexation” of large parts of the West Bank, which included the transfer of Israeli citizens into settlements, forcing out Palestinians.

It further noted that a customs union – established in 1967 and formalized in 1994 – under which free trade prevails between Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, is inherently flawed because of the structural differences between the two economies and their vastly different levels of economic development.

According to the report, the outcomes are made worse due to a lack of cooperation and the fact that Israel sets the terms and conditions of how the union operates.

“Effectively, the Occupied Palestinian Territory is isolated from the more competitive global markets, which in turn fosters an extremely high level of a trade diversion towards Israel, the report says,” said UNCTAD.

To break the cycle of dispossession and backwards development, the report called for replacing the union with a new framework that guarantees the Palestinian National Authority full control over its customs territory, borders and trade and industrial policies.

Strengthening peacekeeping requires collective action, UN official tells Security Council

Highlighting complex and evolving challenges, the head of UN peacekeeping on Wednesday called for heightened vigilance and a more robust response to existential threats against both peacekeepers and those they strive to defend.

“Improving peacekeeping is, by its very essence, a collective endeavour,” Jean-Pierre Lacroix, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, told the Security Council on Wednesday.

“Ensuring that our missions are fit for purpose and perform well, requires action by all of us and all of us working together,” he added, noting the role of the UN Secretariat, Member States, countries which contribute personnel, host nations and regional organizations.

In his briefing, Mr. Lacroix outlined steps taken by the Organization and the results these have yielded. One of the key areas includes assessing peacekeepers’ performance.

“We are putting in place the policies and evaluation systems that will enable all of us, collectively, to better tailor our efforts to strengthen peacekeeping and better support all peacekeepers, whether uniformed or civilian,” he informed the 15-member Council.

The engagement and the mobilization of all stakeholders, and, especially Member States, is vital for achieving success, underscored the UN peacekeeping chief.

In particular, he called on all Member States “to assess the evolution of the performance of UN peacekeeping operations”, including through visiting them on the ground and sharing their findings with the Organization.



UN Photo/Manuel Elias

UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Jean-Pierre Lacroix briefs the Security Council.

Better training, equipment and logistics needed

He also urged those countries with advanced military capability, to provide more troops and police to UN peace operations as well as vital equipment and logistics, including helicopters, counter-IED capacities, rapid reaction forces, and medical support.

He called for troop and police contributing countries to undergo better training, prior to being deployed.

Mr. Lacroix also spoke of improvement in [gender parity in peacekeeping](#) operations – both at Headquarters and in the field – where representation of women has slightly improved.

“Women officers now represent 18 per cent of all officers in the Office of Military Affairs, and we are committed to raising this proportion further. In the field, women police officers represent 21 per cent of our Individual Police Officers, and 7 per cent of our Formed Police Units,” he said.

Concluding his briefing, he also highlighted the importance of strong partnership with civil society groups, particularly in the on-going effort to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse by UN personnel, as well as ensuring accountability and victim support. In that context, he also urged troop contributing countries to complete investigations into allegations of wrongdoing within six-months, the timeframe for UN investigators to complete their work.

“Only by working together will the UN, Member States and civil society end this behaviour which irreparably harms victims and tarnishes the reputation

of thousands of UN personnel who serve with honour,” he said.



UN Photo/Loey Felipe

Sarah Blakemore, CEO of NGO Keeping Children Safe, speaks at the Security Council meeting on UN peacekeeping operations.

Necessity for ‘robust’ safeguarding mechanisms

Speaking alongside Mr. Lacroix, Sarah Blakemore, the CEO of the non-governmental organization Keeping Children Safe, called for strong protection systems to stop abuse from happening and, should it occur, to ensure that victims are protected and supported, and bring perpetrators to justice.

“Too often victims have no way of reporting the abuse, no medical or psychosocial care and no access to justice,” she said.

“We call on world leaders to champion the safety of children at the highest levels by requiring that all organizations involved in peacekeeping implement robust international child safeguarding standards, including having advocates for victims’ rights.”

‘Action for Peacekeeping’ initiative

In March, [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) launched the [Action for Peacekeeping](#) (A4P), to strengthen global political commitment to peacekeeping operations. He also called on Member States to join him in developing a set of mutually-agreed principles and commitments to create peacekeeping operations fit for the future, with the goal of reaching a formal agreement by the end of the year.

Specific efforts include the [Declaration of Shared Commitments](#), which has been [endorsed by 55 nations](#) (as of 11 September) as well as thematic consultations on peacebuilding; performance; protection of civilians;

partnerships; and political dimensions, such as peace operation mandate and resources, role of the Security Council.

[Cancer is a growing global threat and prevention is key, UN study shows](#)

More than 18 million new cases of cancer are expected this year and it's estimated that 9.6 million people will die from various forms of the disease in 2018, the UN's International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) said on Wednesday.

According to [IARC](#), a specialized cancer agency of the [World Health Organization](#), the disease is a growing global health threat.

One in five men and one in six women worldwide, develop cancer during their lifetime, and one in eight men and one in 11 women die from it, IARC's 's [Global Cancer Observatory](#) says, in its first report since 2012.

"These new figures highlight that much remains to be done to address the alarming rise in the cancer burden globally and that prevention has a key role to play," said IARC Director, Dr. Christopher Wild.

"Efficient prevention and early detection policies must be implemented urgently to complement treatments in order to control this devastating disease across the world."

Six years ago, there were an estimated 14.1 million new cancer cases and 8.2 million cancer-related deaths, compared with 12.7 million and 7.6 million, respectively, in 2008.

Globally, it's estimated that Asia will see nearly half of the new cases and more than half of the cancer deaths in 2018, partly because the region has nearly 60 per cent of the world's population.

Europe accounts for nearly a quarter of global cancer cases and one-fifth of cancer deaths, although it has only nine per cent of the global population.

The Americas have more than 13 per cent of the global population but account for 21 per cent of cancers and some 14 per cent of global mortality.

In Asia and in Africa, cancer deaths (57.3 per cent and 7.3 per cent respectively) are higher than the number identified (48.4 per cent and 5.8 per cent).

This is because these regions have a higher frequency of certain cancer types that are associated with poorer prognosis, and higher mortality rates, IARC

says, in addition to limited access to diagnosis and treatment.

Lung cancer is a leading cause of death for both men and women and is the leading cause of cancer death in women in 28 countries, IARC says.

The highest incidence rates of this form of the disease in women are in North America, Northern and Western Europe – notably Denmark and the Netherlands – China, and Australia and New Zealand; with Hungary topping the list.

The findings suggest that many countries have much more to do to prevent smoking-related cancers, although a significant number have adopted measures to reduce smoking and exposure to second-hand tobacco smoke.

“Given that the tobacco epidemic is at different stages in different regions, and in men and women, the results highlight the need to continue to put in place targeted and effective tobacco control policies in every country of the world,” said Dr. Freddie Bray, IARC’s Head of the Section of Cancer Surveillance.

In addition to cancers of the lungs, those that target the female breast and colorectal areas, are the most common types.

They are also among the five most dangerous forms of cancer, representing one third of all cancer incidence and mortality worldwide, according to IARC’s GLOBOCAN 2018 database, which provides estimates of incidence and mortality in 185 countries for 36 types of cancer.

IARC says that the increasing prevalence of cancer is due to many factors, from population growth and ageing, while a change in the types of cancer diagnosed is linked to social and economic development.

This is particularly true in fast-growing economies, IARC says, noting a shift from cancers related to poverty and infection, to cancers associated with lifestyles more typical of industrialized countries.

A record one million Syrians displaced over six months, during six key battles: UN investigators

All parties to the seven-year Syria conflict and the States that support them should do “everything in their power” to prevent a full-scale military assault on Idlib, a high-level [United Nations-appointed](#) panel of investigators said on Wednesday.

“All the other disasters would be minor events compared to what can happen in

Idlib,” said Paulo Pinheiro, chair of the Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.

At a press conference in Geneva, to discuss the panel’s latest findings on rights violations committed in Syria, Mr. Pinheiro called on “all parties to the conflict and those states who support them, to do everything in their power to prevent a massacre in Idlib”.

The development comes amid growing international calls for a de-escalation of violence in and around the north-west region, which is home to nearly three million people. They are some of the victims of an “unprecedented” level of internal displacement across Syria, according to the report.

On Tuesday, UN Secretary-General [António Guterres](#) urged those involved in the more than seven-year war to avoid a further escalation, warning that failure to do so would unleash “a humanitarian nightmare unlike any seen in the blood-soaked Syrian conflict” so far.

The UN chief also underscored that while the presence of terrorist groups sheltering in Idlib could not be tolerated, fighting terrorism “does not absolve warring parties of their core obligations under international law”.

Some 10,000 fighters that have been identified as terrorists by the UN are believed to be living in Idlib, in among 2.9 million civilians, Mr. Pinheiro said. The protection of civilians was paramount, he insisted:

“Of course, you don’t have anything against fighting against terrorists, but something has to be done to protect the rights of three million people and one million children. I think that this is something that has to move the powers involved in this decision.”

Unprecedented levels of civilian displacement

The latest Commission of Inquiry report is its 16th update on the conflict, as mandated by the [Human Rights Council](#) in August 2011.

A father and his three children in Douma City, Syria, after having returned from displacement in Al-Dwair, one of the sheltering sites in Rural Damascus that received people from East Ghouta fleeing heavy fighting. 1 July 2018.
UNHCR/Vivian Tou’meh

It details how in under six months this year, as pro-Government forces moved to recapture large swathes of territory, more than one million Syrian men, women, and children were displaced in six key battles.

Most now face dire living conditions, Hanny Megally, Member of the Commission of Inquiry, told journalists in Geneva.

“Many of them are living in tents,” he said. “Many of them are living in destroyed property...So any further deterioration of their living situations is of great concern.”

Witnesses consistently recalled the distinctive smell of chlorine at the affected sites and on victims' clothing – *Commission of Inquiry report on Syria*

The panel's 24-page report highlights intense fighting between January and June in Aleppo, northern Homs, Damascus, Rif Damascus, Dara'a, and Idlib governorates.

Most battles were marked by war crimes by all belligerents, it says, including launching indiscriminate attacks, deliberately attacking protected objects, using prohibited weapons, pillaging and/or forced displacement.

In other instances, parties to the conflict failed to take all feasible precautions to protect civilians, as required by international humanitarian law.

Noting the "extremely high cost" to civilians of the battle to regain territory, Mr Megally said that some areas including Yarmouk camp in Damascus and parts of eastern Ghouta had been so heavily destroyed "that there is no foreseeable possibility of civilian return".

The panel's findings also detail alleged chemical weapons attacks by Government forces in heavily populated areas of Douma, eastern Ghouta, earlier this year. "Witnesses consistently recalled the distinctive smell of chlorine at the affected sites and on victims' clothing," the report reads.

On the munitions allegedly used in the Douma attacks, the report indicates that "material evidence...indicated a type known to have been used only by Government forces or, rarely by militias".

"What we've identified is rockets that were manufactured in Iran, that have been adapted in Syria and have been adapted in a way that they could be used, it seems, to then be filled up with chlorine and used in some of these chlorine attacks," Mr. Megally said.