

A Survey of Large Language Model Use and Its Technical Limitations in Military Systems Through a Decolonial Lens (Extended Abstract)

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Background and Central Research Question

The accelerated integration of Large Language Models (LLMs) into military and defense sectors marks a significant ethical and societal shift, one that risks exacerbating global power imbalances (de Roucy-Rochegonde 2025). Major technology corporations such as Google, Meta, Microsoft, and Amazon are increasingly supplying AI and cloud capabilities for defense applications, including notable contracts with the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) (Coveri et al. 2025). Proponents argue for the necessity of militarized AI to maintain strategic advantages and enhance decision-making speed (Shinego 2025) and precision (Fereidooni and Heidt 2024). However, this acceleration requires a critical evaluation of its impact, particularly on individuals in global conflict settings which these technologies are used on. My research addresses this need by examining the convergence of LLM technology and military applications through a decolonial theoretical framework. The central question of my research is: How do the inherent technical limitations of LLMs, when analyzed through a decolonial lens, serve to automate and amplify historical colonial dynamics of power, control, and the purposeful misrepresentation of non-Western cultures? In this work, I first survey all publicly-identifiable use cases of LLMs across various military domains. I then apply Edward Said's framework of Orientalism to deconstruct how these technical limitations, which range from bias and lack of accountability to data colonialism and Western-centric ethics, perpetuate colonial power structures by embedding Eurocentric biases and facilitating the "Othering" of populations (Mollema 2024).

Decolonial Theoretical Framework

To analyze the implications of militarized LLMs, I use Edward Said's theory of Orientalism as my primary decolonial lens. Said's foundational argument is that the West has historically constructed a distorted image of the East, not as an objective reality, but as a discursive practice to legitimize and facilitate imperial domination (Said 2003). This framework of "Orientalism" functions as a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Ori-

ent" (Chowdhury 2023). I focus on several key Saidian concepts. First is the process of "Othering," whereby Western powers created a binary between the "familiar (Europe, the West, 'us')" and the "strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')" (Said 2003, p. 43). This dichotomy consistently portrayed non-Western peoples as "irrational, depraved (fallen), child-like, 'different'," in binary contrast to the "rational, virtuous, mature, 'normal'" European, thereby justifying colonial intervention as a moral imperative (Said 2003, p. 40). Second, I utilize Said's concept of the power of representation, or more accurately, misrepresentation. Said demonstrated how Western scholarship, media, and even scientific expeditions produced knowledge about the "Orient" that was never neutral but was constructed to serve imperial interests, effectively silencing the voices and self-representation of the colonized. As Said noted, "the one thing the Orient could not do was to represent itself" (Lazem et al. 2022). This "weaponization of representation" created a system where "evidence of the Orient was credible only after it had passed through and been made firm by the refining fire of the Orientalist's work" (Said 2003, p. 283), which can be called the scientification process. By applying this framework, I argue that LLMs in military systems are not merely technical tools but are deeply embedded in this legacy, functioning as modern-day apparatuses for producing and disseminating Orientalist knowledge, thereby automating and scaling these historical dynamics of power and control.

A Survey of Military LLM Applications and Analysis of Technical Limitations

My work to date has involved two primary components. First, I conducted a comprehensive survey of the publicly-identifiable applications of LLMs in military settings. My methodology involved a systematic review of government publications, academic literature, and industry reports to create a matrix of specific use cases across domains such as Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition, and Reconnaissance (ISTAR), command and control, logistics, and autonomous systems. This survey grounds my theoretical analysis in concrete, real-world applications, revealing how these technologies are specifically intended to automate and enhance mechanisms of surveillance, targeting, and control.

The second part of my research has been the application

of the Saidian decolonial framework to analyze the well-documented technical limitations of LLMs within these military contexts. I argue that what are often framed as neutral technical limitations are, in practice, mechanisms that reproduce and automate colonial power dynamics. For instance, the inherent **bias** in LLMs, which reflects and amplifies societal prejudices from their training data (Mei, Fereidooni, and Caliskan 2023), directly translates into discriminatory targeting and risk assessment. When an LLM associates violence with Muslims at a higher rate (Abid, Farooqi, and Zou 2021), its use in surveillance can lead to the misidentification of threats and fatal errors, perpetuating an Orientalist gaze that frames non-Western populations as inherently dangerous. This mirrors Said's analysis of how Western knowledge has historically been weaponized for military objectives.

The lack of **accountability and responsibility** in LLM-driven systems creates a "responsibility gap" (Vallor and Vierkant 2024) that ripples the history of colonial bureaucracies, where violence was enacted through chains of command that diffused individual culpability. When an LLM-guided system causes harm, assigning legal and moral responsibility becomes exceedingly difficult (?), leading to a form of technological impunity that shields operators and developers, much like colonial administrators were insulated from the consequences of their policies. Similarly, the **opacity and lack of explainability** of these "black box" systems (Malik 2024) replicate the power dynamic where knowledge produced by the colonizer is inaccessible to the colonized. Those subjected to the decisions of military LLMs have no means to understand or contest the logic, echoing how Said's "Orientalist" expert held ultimate authority over the "Orient."

I have also analyzed how **sycophancy**, the tendency of LLMs to align with a user's viewpoint (Fanous et al. 2025), can create a dangerous echo chamber for military decision-makers. A sycophantic LLM may simply validate a commander's pre-existing biases rather than providing an objective assessment, reinforcing the self-confirming nature of Orientalist discourse that Said critiqued. Furthermore, the issue of **data scarcity** for non-Western languages and cultures leads directly to **data colonialism** (Ugwudike 2023). To overcome data gaps, military and corporate entities engage in the mass extraction of data from populations, often without their consent, treating their communications and lives as raw resources to be exploited for enhanced surveillance. The development of an LLM by the Israeli military trained on vast quantities of intercepted Palestinian communications is a stark example of this, directly paralleling the colonial extraction of resources to maintain control (Biesecker, Mednick, and Burke 2025).

My analysis extends to the **lack of real-world and real-time understanding** in LLMs, which operate on static, text-based knowledge disconnected from physical and temporal reality (Harnad 2024). This "symbol grounding problem" mirrors the colonial tendency to impose abstract, text-based Western models onto complex, lived realities in non-Western societies, often with disastrous consequences. The **Western-centric ethics** embedded in these models (Ghosh

et al. 2024) further this dynamic, imposing a culturally specific set of values as a universal standard, a core feature of the Orientalist project. Finally, the propensity of LLMs to **hallucinate** and generate confident-sounding misinformation (Waldo and Boussard 2024) represents a technological extension of how Orientalist discourse produced and legitimized fictions about the "Other" under the guise of authoritative knowledge. When military decisions are based on these technological fabrications, it perpetuates a legacy of actions predicated on inaccurate and dehumanizing representations.

Contributions, Significance, and Future Work

The primary contribution of my research is to reframe the conversation around the ethics of military AI, which I argue should not be a purely technical or utilitarian analysis. I demonstrate that both the use and limitations of military LLMs are deeply political and historical, functioning as engines for a new form of digital Orientalism. We must address how LLM vulnerabilities reproduce global systemic inequalities and colonial legacies within technologically advanced military frameworks. The significance of this research is underscored by the current use of such systems in conflict zones like Gaza, where AI-powered targeting systems are reportedly being used to automate and accelerate lethal decision-making, streamlining killing under a veneer of technological efficiency. My analysis provides a critical language to understand and contest this development, showing how it launders accountability and perpetuates a colonial logic where certain populations are rendered expendable by opaque, biased, and fundamentally flawed technological systems, allowing for a "mass assassination factory", an unprecedented large-scale devastation powered by militarized AI tools, with total impunity and no legal accountability (Abraham 2024).

Position Statement

As a researcher of Southwest Asian descent with a technical background in Western institutions, I occupy a hybrid positionality that informs this inquiry. I have witnessed firsthand the development of technologies for military and surveillance applications within Big Tech, which informs my commitment to deconstructing the power dynamics embedded within these systems. While my work to date has focused on a comprehensive survey and theoretical analysis, my future work will involve deeper case studies, focusing on specific systems and their documented impacts on the AI governance and International Humanitarian Law (IHL) in advocacy for the lives of Global Majority.

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