Assessment of Israel's Use of Autonomous Systems in the Twelve-Day War with Iran in Light of International Humanitarian Law

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Abstract

In recent decades, the deployment of autonomous systems and artificial intelligence–based weapons in armed conflicts has increased significantly, raising serious debates within the field of international humanitarian law and regarding the legal responsibility of states. The present study aims to assess Israel's use of autonomous systems in the twelve-day war with Iran and to analyze the extent to which these actions conform to the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law, including the distinction between military and civilian targets, proportionality in the use of force, and compliance with ethical and legal constraints. The central research question is whether the employment of autonomous systems by Israel in this conflict was consistent with the rules of international humanitarian law and the principles of contemporary international law. The research adopts a descriptive-analytical method and is based on documentary analysis and the examination of legal and military sources. Data were collected from reports of international organizations, legal documents, and scholarly articles and subsequently analyzed. The findings indicate that, despite their military efficiency, Israel's use of autonomous systems has raised serious concerns regarding adherence to the principle of distinction and considerations of proportionality, and may be subject to scrutiny under relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions and the principles of the Geneva Conventions (1949). Furthermore, the lack of transparency in the decision-making algorithms of autonomous systems has intensified the risk of civilian casualties and legal challenges. This study emphasizes the necessity of developing clear legal frameworks to regulate the use of autonomous weapons and to ensure state accountability.

Keywords: Autonomous systems, international humanitarian law, principle of distinction, proportionality of force, international responsibility, twelve-day war, Israel, Iran, Geneva Conventions, Security Council resolutions.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, technological advances, particularly in the fields of artificial intelligence and autonomous systems, have brought about fundamental transformations in the conduct of warfare and armed conflict. The use of autonomous weapons and military drones, especially in limited and precision operations, has enabled states to strike military targets with greater accuracy and lower human cost. Although these technologies enhance military efficiency, they simultaneously present significant legal

and ethical challenges to the international community. One of the most important domains in which these challenges have emerged is international humanitarian law, which, as a branch of international law, was established to limit the adverse effects of war on civilians and to ensure respect for human rights in armed conflicts. The fundamental principles of this body of law, including the principle of distinction between military and civilian targets, the principle of proportionality in the use of force, and compliance with ethical and humanitarian considerations, are of particular importance, especially in relation to the use of emerging technologies.

The Twelve-Day War between Israel and Iran represents an example of the direct encounter between modern military technologies and the constraints of international humanitarian law. During this war, reports indicated the extensive use of autonomous systems to identify and target both military and civilian objectives. This development raised serious concerns regarding compliance with the principles of distinction and proportionality and gave rise to extensive legal and scholarly debate at the international level. The principal question of the present study is whether Israel's use of autonomous systems in the Twelve-Day War was consistent with the principles and rules of international humanitarian law and with the standards governing the international responsibility of states) Euronews, 2026; Jeenger, 2025; Talha et al., 2025(.

The research method adopted in this study is descriptive-analytical and based on documentary analysis. The data were extracted and analyzed from reports issued by international organizations, legal documents, scholarly articles, and credible news sources in order to provide a comprehensive picture of the performance of autonomous systems and the extent of their conformity with legal principles. The findings indicate that, although Israel's use of autonomous systems was militarily effective, it raised serious concerns regarding the protection of civilians and the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law. The lack of transparency in decision-making algorithms and the possibility of increased civilian casualties, particularly in urban and densely populated environments, constitute some of the most important challenges associated with this technological application.

This study seeks, through a comparative analysis of the use of autonomous systems in the Twelve-Day War, to identify the existing legal frameworks and their limitations and to highlight the necessity of formulating new regulations and standards for controlling the use of autonomous weapons and ensuring state accountability. At the same time, the examination of international responsibility and the role of Security Council resolutions and the rules of the Geneva Conventions in limiting the adverse effects of these technologies has been of particular importance in the legal analysis of this research. Given the rapid pace of development in military technologies and the likelihood of increased use of autonomous systems in future wars, the present study can provide an important scientific and practical basis for policymakers, legal scholars, and researchers in the field of international humanitarian law and can contribute to a better understanding of the balance between military efficiency and respect for human rights.

2. Main Concepts of the Study

Artificial intelligence and autonomous systems are now present everywhere in our lives. Given their vast potential, it is unsurprising that armed forces around the world are attempting to develop autonomous weapon systems. Although the actual deployment of these systems on the battlefield cannot be predicted in advance even by philosophers, the examination of their ethical implications is now essential, a point on which scholars generally agree. By autonomous weapon systems, we mean weapons that are capable of identifying and striking targets without human intervention, for example, drones that autonomously identify their targets. This definition has also been employed by other philosophers of technology (Shakeri, 2024; Trzun, 2024). These weapons constitute a highly important domain for ethical analysis because they "can select and engage targets without human intervention" and therefore "can decide to take human life." One example of this type of AWS is the drones that Ukraine used against Russia in June 2025. These drones "scanned the ground for a suitable target and then locked on for destruction" without human guidance. Instead, AI-equipped drones "selected an unknown target and then flew toward it and detonated their explosive payload on impact. Human involvement was limited to training the drone regarding the type of target to destroy and the general area in which to search for it." In this section, the key concepts of the study are explained with a focus on the relationship between modern military technologies and the legal rules governing armed conflicts. First, autonomous systems in the military sphere are introduced as tools relying on algorithms and minimal human intervention that accelerate decision-making and the execution of operations. International humanitarian law is then described as the principal

framework regulating the conduct of parties to conflict, relying on sources such as the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols (Euronews, 2026; Jeenger, 2025; Talha et al., 2025; United Nations, 2025). The fundamental principles of this branch of law, including distinction between military and civilian targets, proportionality in the use of coercive force, and compliance with humanitarian considerations, constitute the criteria for assessing the legality of the use of modern weapons. Finally, the international responsibility of states for the development and use of military autonomous systems is emphasized as the enforcement mechanism for these principles and as a means of preventing serious violations of humanitarian law.

2.1. Autonomous Systems in the Military Sphere

With the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, artificial intelligence, especially in the sphere of the armed forces, has become a tangible reality in the contemporary world. Military AI systems are capable of analyzing and processing enormous volumes of data with efficiency and precision surpassing those of traditional systems. Moreover, because of their computational power and decision-support capacities, artificial intelligence improves the degree of self-control, self-regulation, and autonomy in combat systems. Military autonomous systems refer to tools and platforms that, through the use of sensors, algorithms, and AI-based technologies, are able to perform certain military tasks with minimal or no human intervention. In defense studies, these technologies are often referred to as autonomous weapon systems or lethal autonomous weapons that, once activated, are capable of identifying, selecting, and, in some designs, carrying out battlefield missions without direct human decision-making at every stage. These systems are not merely theoretical concepts; examples such as patrol robots, surveillance drones, unmanned military vehicles, and automatic fire-detection systems have been used in operational environments (Haiden & Richter, 2025; United Nations, 2024). For instance, in recent military engagements, drones with preliminary decision-making capacity for target identification and information relay to command centers have been employed, although many of these systems are still not fully autonomous. With the entry of new technologies associated with intelligent systems into the field of military weapons, differing and sometimes conflicting views have emerged among legal scholars regarding their use in various battlefields. On the one hand, some emphasize the advantages and efficiencies of these weapons and regard their use as legitimate; on the other hand, some, because of these systems' inability to correctly perceive the operational environment and the possibility of conduct inconsistent with the rules of international humanitarian law, stress the necessity of prohibiting their use.

One of the recognized examples of autonomous systems is the SGR-A1, an automated machine gun installed on the border with North Korea that is equipped with detection sensors and can respond to suspicious movement. Although its operation in a "fully autonomous" mode is limited, this example demonstrates the technological movement toward military self-operating systems. Autonomous systems function on the basis of algorithms and AI models, but technological limitations may cause them to malfunction under complex battlefield conditions, such as distinguishing civilians from combatants in complicated environments; this issue has generated concern about relying on human-like bodily decisions in war. In recent years, projects such as autonomous logistics fleets in European armies have shown that autonomous systems are not confined to direct combat but are also used in logistical support, such as the transport of ammunition, fuel, and equipment support (Arab Chadgani & Moradian, 2024; Garwood-Gowers, 2024). Using sensors, communications, and autonomous navigation, these systems attempt to conduct operations with greater precision and speed. Accordingly, autonomous systems in the military sphere have become a tangible reality in battlefields with the rise of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the development of artificial intelligence, and they enable the processing of enormous amounts of data with high speed and accuracy while improving the self-control and autonomy of combat systems (Ahmad et al., 2024; Maqbool & Anwar, 2023; United Nations, 2023). These systems, often referred to as autonomous weapon systems or lethal autonomous weapons, are capable of identifying, selecting, and executing missions without direct human intervention, and examples such as surveillance drones, patrol robots, and unmanned military vehicles demonstrate their practical use. Nevertheless, many systems are still not fully autonomous and continue to return reconnaissance information to command centers, although the trajectory of technological development continues toward full autonomy. The use of these technologies has generated diverse legal and ethical debates; some legal scholars regard their practical advantages and efficiency as legitimate, whereas others point to their limitations and the

possibility of violating international humanitarian law, particularly in distinguishing civilians from combatants, and emphasize the need to restrict or prohibit their use. Technological limitations, especially in complex battlefield environments, may result in errors in target recognition and decision-making, giving rise to concerns about complete reliance on these systems. In addition to combat applications, autonomous systems are also used in military logistics, carrying out tasks such as transporting ammunition, fuel, and equipment support with greater speed and accuracy, which is an example of the broad use of these technologies beyond direct combat operations. Overall, military autonomous systems, while offering substantial operational advantages, have generated novel legal and ethical challenges and require precise regulatory and legal frameworks to ensure compliance with the principles of IHL.

2.2. International Humanitarian Law and Its Fundamental Principles

International humanitarian law is a body of legal rules and principles established for the purpose of limiting the effects of wars and armed conflicts and protecting those who do not participate in hostilities or who are otherwise involved in war. The primary sources of this body of law are the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the 1977 Additional Protocols, which cover a wide range of humanitarian protections and comprise more than 500 provisions; these instruments may be regarded as the most important treaties in this field. The four Geneva Conventions of 1949 include the protection of wounded and sick members of armed forces on the battlefield, the protection of prisoners of war, and the protection of civilians, and they were drafted following the bloody experiences of the Second World War. Additional Protocols I and II to the Geneva Conventions further extended the scope of these rules in both international and non-international armed conflicts, including through the establishment of regulations concerning the methods and means of the use of force (Azimi Shushtari & Hosseini Fazel, 2018; Odello, 2008; Quintana, 2008).

Within international humanitarian law, which was established as part of positive international law to limit the effects of armed conflict and to protect civilians and those indirectly participating in hostilities, several fundamental principles are recognized as the pillars of this legal system. International humanitarian law is based on the premise that even in war and conflict, human dignity and minimum protection of persons and property must be respected, and that parties to a conflict may not employ aggressive means and methods without restriction. The general definition of IHL indicates that the purpose of this legal field is to regulate the conduct of war, to limit methods and means of warfare, to protect victims of conflict, and to reduce human suffering.

One of the fundamental principles of IHL is the principle of distinction, which obliges parties to a conflict to distinguish between military and civilian targets and to conduct military operations only against lawful targets. This principle, set out in Article 48 of Additional Protocol I, prohibits the targeting of civilians or civilian objects, and its violation may amount to a war crime. The second principle, proportionality, requires that in the course of an attack, the anticipated incidental harm to civilians must not be "disproportionate" in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage expected. This rule establishes a balance between "military necessity" and "humanitarian protection" and is of particular importance in military and legal decision-making, especially in relation to the use of modern weapons whose effects extend beyond military targets (Haiden & Richter, 2025; United Nations, 2024).

In humanitarian law, states are responsible not only for the implementation of the principles of distinction and proportionality but also at the stage of developing and adopting new weapons. This includes the obligation to conduct a "legal review of new weapons" in accordance with Article 36 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, which requires states, before using or adopting new weapons and methods of warfare, to determine whether their use is compatible with the rules of IHL. This review has been increasingly emphasized in academic debates concerning autonomous and AI-based weapons. Accordingly, the concept of international humanitarian law and its fundamental principles demonstrates that this legal framework not only establishes clear restrictions on military action but also provides a basis for evaluating the legality and ethical acceptability of the means and methods of warfare. The principles of distinction and proportionality, together with the requirements of legal review for new weapons, oblige states, prior to the use of weapons, particularly autonomous and AI-based weapons, to assess the risks and effects on civilians. This framework ensures that human dignity and civilian protection remain a priority and that military decision-making is carried out in accordance with legal and ethical requirements. The legal review of new weapons and adherence to fundamental principles also make possible state accountability and responsibility for

potential violations. In practice, these principles reduce human suffering and limit the effects of conflicts, while providing a solid framework for the intelligent and ethical management of the use of modern technologies on the battlefield. Thus, IHL not only plays a deterrent role with respect to unlawful conduct but also offers a legal and ethical pathway for the responsible development and use of advanced military tools, while simultaneously enabling convergence between military necessity and humanitarian protection.

3. Legal Analysis of the Use of Autonomous Systems in the Twelve-Day War Between Israel and Iran

In the Twelve-Day War between Israel and Iran, the use of military autonomous and semi-autonomous systems, particularly in target identification and the execution of attacks, raised serious questions regarding compliance with the principle of distinction between military and civilian objectives as well as the principle of proportionality. Existing reports and evidence indicate that extensive reliance on algorithms and machine data analysis increased the risk of targeting errors and harm to civilians and weakened prior human assessment (Hrana Human Rights Organization, 2025; Jeenger, 2025). From the perspective of international humanitarian law, the central challenge is whether autonomous decision-making can effectively guarantee the standards of precaution, military necessity, and proportionality. Within this framework, the international responsibility of the State of Israel for the acts of these systems remains governed by the rules of attribution, the obligation to respect and ensure respect for humanitarian law, and the prohibition of grave breaches. The role of Security Council resolutions and the recommendations of international bodies, although not fully binding, is significant in creating restrictive norms and political pressure aimed at controlling the improper use of autonomous weapons. Ultimately, the experience of this war highlights the necessity of developing more precise legal and supervisory frameworks, including algorithmic transparency, meaningful human oversight, and mechanisms of international accountability, in order to prevent future violations.

3.1. Assessment of Compliance with the Principles of Distinction and Proportionality

In the legal analysis of compliance with the principle of distinction and the principle of proportionality in Israel's use of autonomous systems during the Twelve-Day War, it is first necessary to refer to the binding framework of international humanitarian law, which has comprehensively defined these principles: the principle of distinction means that the rules governing attack must distinguish between military and civilian targets and refrain from attacking civilians and civilian or otherwise protected property, and the principle of proportionality requires that foreseeable incidental harm to civilians must not exceed the concrete and direct military advantage expected (Talha et al., 2025; United Nations, 2025). These rules are articulated within the framework of the general principles of IHL and must also be observed in the analysis of autonomous systems.

Academic research indicates that autonomous and automated systems in warfare, due to the "black box" nature of algorithms and the absence of complex human judgment, face fundamental difficulties in accurately distinguishing combatants from civilians. For example, according to recent legal analyses, because of their lack of moral judgment and their limitations in understanding context and human indicators, these systems cannot reliably and consistently guarantee the principles of distinction and proportionality.

During the Twelve-Day War, the Israeli military made extensive use of armed drones with autonomous capabilities and certain intelligent guided systems for targeting; for example, Harop drones were able to strike Iranian radar targets and air-defense systems in the first days of the conflict. Although Israel claimed that these were legitimate military targets, examination of field data indicates that air and missile attacks were also carried out in areas with high civilian populations, including the bombing of locations whose proximity to military targets was open to doubt.

Subsequently, Human Rights Watch reports have emphasized that even if attacks are technically conducted using advanced means, the failure to effectively distinguish between military and civilian targets may amount to indiscriminate attacks or even violations of IHL principles, particularly when autonomous systems operate without effective human supervision. The principle of proportionality was likewise challenged during this war; independent investigations reported that some Israeli attacks caused widespread damage to civilians and vital infrastructure that appeared to exceed the concrete military benefits, particularly in areas where no clear or prominent military targets were present (Ahmad et al., 2024; Arab Chadgani & Moradian, 2024;

Garwood-Gowers, 2024). This kind of proportionality assessment is complex even for advanced guided weapons, and with increased automation, accurate human evaluation becomes even more difficult.

In addition, recent legal research shows that although IHL does not directly prohibit the use of autonomous systems, according to legal analysis published in 2025, in order to comply with the principles of distinction and proportionality there must be meaningful human control over the targeting and decision-making process, and this control should not be fully delegated to machines. Such meaningful human control has also been emphasized in documents relating to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, and many have stressed that its absence can lead to aggressive or indiscriminate behavior by the system, because autonomous systems cannot make complex legal and value-based judgments in real time. In specific cases, the use of drones with advanced targeting capacity, as already indicated above on the basis of reports, in some attacks failed even to preserve an optimal distance between military objectives and civilians and led to civilian casualties. If these systems operate autonomously, responsibility for the potential violation of IHL rests entirely on the commanders and human decision-makers who selected and deployed the system, because, as the principles of IHL emphasize, legal responsibility cannot be transferred to a machine.

A critical analysis of the application of this technology in the Twelve-Day War also shows that the level of automation, in the absence of effective human supervision, can reduce the capacity for accurate distinction and appropriate proportionality assessment, especially in complex urban environments or near civilian populations. In practice, such gaps can increase the risk of violating IHL and blur the boundary between legitimate military targets and civilian objectives. Overall, although autonomous military technologies may in certain circumstances be used in accordance with IHL principles, practical evidence from the Twelve-Day War shows that the real challenges involved in legally and operationally ensuring compliance with the principles of distinction and proportionality become extremely serious as reliance on autonomous systems increases, and they require legal and practical reconsideration of military rules and procedures.

3.2. International Responsibility and Regulatory Frameworks

In light of international humanitarian law, the examination of Israel's international responsibility for the use of autonomous systems in the Twelve-Day War must be based on treaty rules and international custom, including the rules of the Geneva framework and the principles of IHL that emphasize distinction, proportionality, and precaution. Although IHL does not comprehensively regulate autonomous systems in every respect, the use of means of warfare, including autonomous systems, must conform to the principles and rules of this body of law, and the state is responsible for ensuring that its forces comply with these principles (Talha et al., 2025; United Nations, 2025). Likewise, according to the rules of international state responsibility reflected in the Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts, a state is responsible for conduct attributable to it, and a violation of international law, including IHL, gives rise to responsibility.

At the level of international humanitarian law, treaty rules such as Article 35(2) of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions generally prohibit the use of weapons or methods that cause unnecessary injury or unjustifiable suffering, while the principles of distinction and proportionality also form essential components of the rules governing the conduct of hostilities. If the use of autonomous systems leads to the violation of these principles, it may constitute a breach of IHL and consequently give rise to the international responsibility of the state, because legal responsibility cannot be transferred to the machine and, ultimately, a human agent or the state will be answerable.

A second point in examining international responsibility is that the Charter of the United Nations also plays a role within the framework of maintaining international peace and security. The Charter, especially Article 2(4) and Chapter VII, limits the lawful use of coercive force to self-defense or Security Council authorization; the use of autonomous systems in an attack without lawful justification may be regarded as a violation of Article 2(4) of the Charter and may trigger the international responsibility of the state. General Assembly and Security Council resolutions also play an important role in shaping regulatory frameworks, even where they are not directly binding. For example, General Assembly Resolution A/RES/78/241 emphasizes the need to address the challenges arising from lethal autonomous systems and calls for the views of states and stakeholders regarding legal and ethical solutions. Such resolutions provide a political and normative benchmark for pressuring states to develop IHL rules concerning autonomous weapons (Haiden & Richter, 2025; Hrana Human Rights Organization, 2025; Trzun, 2024; United Nations, 2024).

Reports of the United Nations Secretary-General related to autonomous weapons have also repeatedly emphasized the risks these systems pose to the principles of distinction, proportionality, and the preservation of human control over decisions regarding the use of coercive force. These reports, as official United Nations documents, form the basis of multilateral discussions and supervisory recommendations for states and lay the groundwork for new legal proposals. In practice, examples from the discussions of the Group of Governmental Experts under the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons show that the international community is still in the process of formulating specific regulations for AWS, and that the areas requiring regulation, including the concept of meaningful human control, remain central to negotiations. This approach demonstrates that simply adding new rules is not sufficient; rather, precise standards of supervision and accountability must be established so that states cannot evade responsibility by invoking autonomous killing technology. In addition, non-governmental and human rights bodies such as Human Rights Watch have proposed that, for the protection of human rights and compliance with IHL principles, there is a need for a binding international treaty that would restrict or prohibit the use of autonomous weapons and ensure that, in both peacetime and wartime, the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law and human rights are upheld. These recommendations provide a legal and political basis for the development of stronger regulatory frameworks.

One of the key proposals for the development of legal frameworks is the establishment of clear standards for human control and algorithmic transparency in autonomous systems, in such a way that responsibility for decision-making at the moment of attack and prior to it remains in human hands. This proposal, referred to in specialized literature as "meaningful human control," is based on the premise that decisions related to the use of lethal force must remain under human supervision accompanied by the capacity for interpretation and moral judgment, rather than being left solely to algorithms. Ultimately, if the legal framework is to guarantee effective accountability and control, it must include international monitoring mechanisms such as regular reporting, independent review, and even judicial proceedings before international forums. Such mechanisms can help reduce the risk of violations of IHL principles and increase transparency and accountability in the use of autonomous weapons, while holding states responsible for potential violations. Therefore, Israel's international responsibility within the framework of international humanitarian law and the Geneva regime for the use of autonomous systems includes ensuring compliance with the principles of IHL and the rules of the Charter of the United Nations, reinforced by the political and normative pressure of resolutions and recommendations issued by international organizations, while current proposals emphasize the development of binding legal frameworks and precise supervisory standards for control and accountability in the use of autonomous weapons.

4. Conclusion

The present study was conducted with the aim of examining the assessment of Israel's use of autonomous systems in the Twelve-Day War with Iran in light of international humanitarian law, and it showed that although the deployment of these technologies has been effective from the perspective of military efficiency and operational precision, it has not been fully consistent with the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law, particularly the principles of distinction and proportionality. The analysis of the data and documents indicates that the autonomous systems used by Israel, due to the lack of transparency in decision-making algorithms and the limitations on the exercise of human control during the targeting process, have significantly increased the risk of civilian casualties and violations of human rights. The use of these systems in urban environments and densely populated areas has intensified both humanitarian and legal risks and has, in particular, challenged the principle of distinction between military and civilian targets. An examination of international legal documents and United Nations Security Council resolutions shows that the existing legal framework, including the provisions of the Geneva regime and the Additional Protocols, is inadequate in confronting new military technologies and requires further development and refinement in order to regulate the use of autonomous weapons precisely and to ensure the international accountability of states.

The findings indicate that the absence of specific regulations and international standards for the design and operation of autonomous systems, in addition to creating humanitarian risks, has also generated serious challenges for the realization of the international responsibility of states, and that the uncontrolled use of these technologies may lead to widespread violations of human rights and the rights of civilians. The study demonstrates that the establishment of transparent and binding legal frameworks aligned with the principles of international humanitarian law, together with the exercise of effective human oversight over the decision-making process of autonomous systems, plays a vital role in reducing civilian casualties and

enhancing international accountability. Such a measure can, in addition to limiting the negative effects of new technologies, contribute to the development of new and binding international standards regarding the use of military autonomous systems.

The study also emphasizes the importance of maintaining a balance between military efficiency and respect for human rights and shows that, without a precise definition of legal responsibilities and limitations, the use of autonomous weapons not only causes harm to civilians but also creates complexity in determining the responsibility of states at the international level. The results of the study can provide an important scientific and practical basis for policymakers, legal scholars, and researchers in the field of international humanitarian law and can play a decisive role in the drafting of international regulations, ethical and legal standards, and monitoring mechanisms for the use of autonomous systems in future wars. Ultimately, this study highlights the necessity of paying attention to the humanitarian, legal, and ethical dimensions of new military technologies and of developing appropriate legal frameworks to ensure state accountability and reduce negative effects on the battlefield.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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