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Israel Suspected of Transferring U.S. Laser Weapon Data to China

By Bill Gertz

The Defense Intelligence Agency suspects Israel shared with China restricted U.S. weapons technology obtained during a joint U.S. – Israeli effort to build a battlefield laser gun, The Washington Times has learned.

Israeli government agents also have tried for the past two years to obtain embargoed weapons know-how from U.S. defense contractors involved in the Tactical High-Energy Laser (THEL) program, said officials familiar with a Pentagon intelligence report on the issue.

The report said officials of the Israeli government armament agency Rafael obtained some restricted technology from a U.S. defense contractor involved in the program in 1996. The unauthorized transfers prompted TRW Space and Electronics Group, the main contractor for the program, to halt further data transfers to the Israelis.

DIA suspicions about the technology leakage are based on reports from U.S. contractor employees in Israel who spotted Chinese technicians working secretly with one of the Israeli companies involved in the laser weapon program, and also from a Chinese official who knew details about it, said the officials who declined to be named.

“If the Chinese are seeking this technology in Israel, it’s another episode in their worldwide effort to purloin Western technology,” said Gary Milhollin, director of the Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control.

The \$131 million joint laser weapon program was launched in 1996 in an effort to rapidly build a weapon to knock out Katyusha rockets fired by Hezbollah guerrillas based in southern Lebanon.

The system consists of a pointer-tracker, a laser, and a battle management system. It is being developed by TRW, two other U.S. contractors — Ball Aerospace & Technology and Contraves Brashear Systems — along with four Israeli firms. Israel expects to field the first anti-rocket laser unit later this year in northern Israel.

As part of a memorandum signed by officials from both countries in July 1996, the lasers are supposed to have built-in software limiting their range. The system is designed for knocking out 122mm Katyusha rockets, which have ranges of several miles, and mortar and artillery. The agreement also restricts transferring the technology

to other countries. The Israelis have been trying to obtain the source codes for the laser's target selection computer software to increase its range so the weapons can be used to knock out other targets such as short-range missiles or aircraft.

The DIA said if Israel obtains the embargoed software coding used to target the laser gun, it could "fire at targets other than those permitted by the Memorandum of Agreement with Washington," and it would allow "a controlled technology to proliferate." "Acquiring and modifying the source codes would help Tel Aviv overcome the mission-limiting U.S. engineering built into the THEL system," the report said.

Some DIA officials were alarmed by several reports that Chinese weapons technicians are working secretly at an Israeli Aircraft Industries (IAI) plant involved in the laser gun program. IAI is working on the THEL system's radar, fire control assemblies and sensors for its pointer-tracker.

According to DIA, Chinese officials were seen at the IAI Systems and Space Technology Division facility outside Tel Aviv twice between July and October 1997. The U.S. employees were told the "Chinese presence" was supposed to be kept secret from the United States. On a third occasion, the U.S. workers at the plant were "rushed" out of the IAI plant after seeing Chinese workers there, the report said.

The report stated that Israeli Aircraft Industries in the past offered transfers of restricted weapons technology to foreign customers in an effort to conclude weapons deals. "IAI has transferred technology to China, possibly including U.S.-supplied technology," the report said.

The DIA said it could not confirm that Chinese officials at the Israeli factory were working on lasers. But the agency said its suspicions were bolstered by a Chinese scientist who had revealed details about the THEL system and asked for more information about the weapon, once called Nautilus, during an international symposium on lasers. "Beijing is working on high-energy deuterium fluoride lasers most likely for weapons applications and has acquired technology in this area from Russia," the report said.

Spokesman for TRW, Ball Aerospace and Contraves Brashear referred calls to the U.S. Army Missile and Space Command in Alabama, which had no immediate comment. A spokeswoman for the Israeli Embassy also had no comment.

Officials said the reference to earlier leaks of U.S. technology from Israel to China involved Beijing's acquisition of U.S. Patriot anti-missile interceptor technology in 1992. The Bush administration investigated whether Israel illegally transferred Patriot know-how, a probe first disclosed by The Times. The investigation failed to confirm intelligence reports indicating one of Washington's closest allies had shared sensitive weapons data with China. CIA Director Robert Gates said in 1993 that China had

acquired the Patriot technology, but government officials were divided over whether Israel had secretly supplied it.

Regarding recent efforts to acquire restricted THEL software, the DIA said that after Rafael was denied access to the source codes, the Israeli representatives demanded further software transfers from the U.S. subcontractor, and also tried to "pressure" TRW into having the State Department grant an export license, the report said. The Israeli program manager and an electronics engineer also tried to illegally obtain software codes and details on the THEL computer controller, according to the DIA.

In a third case, an Israeli Defense Ministry consultant tried to acquire "tracking algorithms" used in the radar focal plane array used by the laser gun's pointer-tracker. Initial requests for the source code were made on May 1, 1997, and after the request was flatly denied, the consultant set up a meeting with TRW official and again demanded the codes for the weapon's software.

"I have no comment on intelligence matters," Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon said. A spokesman for the U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command in Huntsville, Ala., said he was unaware of the Israeli efforts to obtain embargoed THEL technology or the improper release of data.