

Israeli team advances in contest to send spacecraft to moon

October 7 2015, byDaniel Estrin



In this Saturday, July 12, 2014 file photo, a supermoon rises over Jerusalem's Old City and the Dome of the Rock. A supermoon is an occurrence when a full moon is closest to the earth in its orbit. A team of Israeli engineers is the first to advance in an international competition sponsored by Google to send a privately-funded spacecraft to the moon, contest organizers announced Wednesday, Oct. 7. (AP Photo/Dusan Vranic, File)

A team of Israeli engineers is the first to advance in an international competition sponsored by Google to send a privately-funded spacecraft

to the moon, contest organizers announced Wednesday.

The Israeli nonprofit group SpaceIL has signed a contract with American aerospace manufacturer SpaceX to launch an unmanned spacecraft into lunar orbit—the first step a team must take toward landing on the moon and winning the \$20 million grand prize. The launch is expected to take place in the second half of 2017.

Google's contest is meant to encourage private industry to create new technologies to reach the moon at lower costs than what governments have spent in past lunar expeditions.

"We wanted the everyday man and woman to know that they could be innovators. They could literally build a spacecraft at their university or in their garages," said Chanda Gonzales, senior director of the Google Lunar XPRIZE contest. "You don't have to be NASA."

The Israeli group is the first of 16 competing teams to finalize a contract with a launch provider and approve the technical and financial details with contest organizers, Gonzales said.

Contestants include groups and private companies from the United States, Malaysia, Italy, Japan, Germany, Hungary, Brazil, Canada, Chile and India.

Two U.S. companies—Astrobotic Technology Inc. and Moon Express—recently announced that they secured launch contracts, but have not yet submitted their agreements to contest organizers for approval, Gonzales said.



In this Monday, Sept. 28, 2015 photo, earth's shadow begins to obscure the view of a so-called supermoon during a total lunar eclipse over the Mediterranean Sea in Netanya, Israel. A team of Israeli engineers is the first to advance in an international competition sponsored by Google to send a privately-funded spacecraft to the moon, contest organizers announced Wednesday, Oct. 7. (AP Photo/Ariel Schalit)

To win the contest, contestants must land a rover on the moon, and it must travel 500 meters (about 1,640 feet) and transmit high definition video and images back to Earth.

Instead of designing a robot that detaches from a lander and travels along the moon's surface, SpaceIL's spacecraft would land on the moon and then launch back in the air to land 500 meters away. SpaceIL unveiled its spacecraft design at a conference Wednesday at the Israeli president's residence.

Contestants have until the end of 2016 to secure an approved launch contract. The lunar mission must be completed by the end of 2017.

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