UAE launches programme to send astronauts into space

December 6 2017

Dubai's ruler on Wednesday launched the United Arab Emirates' first space programme aimed at sending four Emirati astronauts to the International Space Station within five years.

"On this day, a new chapter in our history begins with the launch of the first UAE Astronaut Programme," within the next five years, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashed Al-Maktoum, the UAE's vice president and prime minister, said in a statement.

"The people of the UAE will break barriers," he said.

The oil-rich Gulf nation has already announced ambitious plans to become the first Arab country to send an [unmanned probe](#) to orbit Mars by 2021, naming it "Hope".

The astronaut programme would make it one of only a handful of states in the Middle East to have sent a person into space as it looks to make good on a pledge "to become global leader in space exploration over the next 50 years".

The first Arab in [outer space](#) was Saudi Arabia's Sultan bin Salman Al-Saud, who flew on a US shuttle mission in 1985. Two years later, Syrian air force pilot Muhammed Faris spent a week aboard the ex-Soviet Union's Mir space station.

Aspiring Emirati astronauts who apply for the programme will go

through a rigorous vetting procedure, with finalists given months of specialised training before the last four are selected.

In the long-term, the UAE says it is planning to build a "Science City" to replicate life on Mars and aims to create the first human settlement on the red planet by 2117.

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