

Satellite images, expert suggest Iranian space launch coming

December 12 2021, by Jon Gambrell



In this satellite photo by Planet Labs Inc., a support vehicle stands parked alongside a massive white gantry that typically houses a rocket on the launch pad as activity is seen at the Imam Khomeini Spaceport in Semnan province, Iran, Saturday, Dec. 11, 2021. Iran appears to be preparing for a space launch as negotiations continue in Vienna over its tattered nuclear deal with world powers, according to an expert and satellite images. Credit: Planet Labs Inc. via AP

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The likely blast off at Iran's Imam Khomeini Spaceport comes as Iranian state media has offered a list of upcoming planned [satellite launches](#) in the works for the Islamic Republic's civilian [space](#) program, which has been beset by a series of failed launches. Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard runs its own parallel program that successfully put a satellite into orbit last year.

Conducting a launch amid the Vienna talks fits the hard-line posture struck by Tehran's negotiators, who already described six previous rounds of diplomacy as a "draft," exasperating Western nations. Germany's new foreign minister has gone as far as to warn that "time is running out for us at this point."

But all this fits into a renewed focus on space by Iran's hard-line President Ebrahim Raisi, said Jeffrey Lewis, an expert at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies who studies Tehran's program. With Iran's former President Hassan Rouhani who shepherded the [nuclear deal](#) out of office, concerns about alienating the talks with launches that the U.S. asserts aids Tehran's ballistic missile program likely have faded.

"They're not walking on eggshells," Lewis said. "I think Raisi's people have a new balance in mind."

Iranian state media did not acknowledge the activity at the spaceport and Iran's mission to the United Nations did not respond to a request for comment. The U.S. military, which tracks space launches, did not respond to requests for comment.

Satellite images taken Saturday by Planet Labs Inc. obtained by The

Associated Press show activity at the spaceport in the desert plains of Iran's rural Semnan province, some 240 kilometers (150 miles) southeast of Tehran.

A support vehicle stood parked alongside a massive white gantry that typically houses a rocket on the launch pad. That support vehicle has appeared in other satellite photos at the site just ahead of a launch. Also visible is a hydraulic crane with a railed platform, also seen before previous launches and likely used to service the rocket.

Other [satellite images](#) in recent days at the spaceport have shown an increase in the number of cars at the facility, another sign of heightened activity that typically precedes a launch. A building also believed to be the "checkout" facility for a rocket has seen increased activity as well, Lewis said.

"This is fairly traditional pre-launch activity," he told the AP.

The activity comes after Iran's state-run IRNA news agency on Dec. 5 published an article saying its space program had four satellites ready for launch. It described one, the low-orbit imaging satellite Zafar 2, as being "under the final phase of preparation." Zafar, which means "victory" in Farsi, weighs some 113 kilograms (250 pounds).



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The Zafar 1, however, failed to enter orbit after a February 2020 launch at the spaceport. That launch used a Simorgh, or "Phoenix," rocket, but it failed to put the satellite into orbit at the correct speed, according to Iranian officials at the time. Iran had spent just under 2 million euros to build the satellite.

Iran's civilian space program has seen a series of setbacks and fatal explosions plague it in recent years. One mysterious blast even caught the attention of then-President Donald Trump in 2019, who tweeted out what appeared to be a classified U.S. spy satellite picture of the

explosion's aftermath with the caption: "The United States of America was not involved in the catastrophic accident."

Meanwhile, the Guard in April 2020 revealed its own secret space program by successfully launching a satellite into orbit. The head of the U.S. Space Command later dismissed the satellite as "a tumbling webcam in space" that wouldn't provide Iran vital intelligence—though it showed Tehran's ability to successfully get into orbit.

Over the past decade, Iran has sent several short-lived satellites into orbit and in 2013 launched a monkey into space. But under Raisi, Iran's Supreme Council of Space has met for the first time in 11 years, according to a recent report by state-run television.

Raisi said at the November meeting that it "shows the determination of this government to develop the space industry." A high-ranking member of the Guard who runs its aerospace program, Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh, attended the meeting along with Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian.

The U.S. alleges such satellite launches defy a U.N. Security Council resolution calling on Iran to undertake no activity related to ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons.

Iran, which long has said it does not seek nuclear weapons, maintains its satellite launches and rocket tests do not have a military component. Tehran also says it hasn't violated the U.N. resolution as it only "called upon" Tehran not to conduct such tests.

But the possible launch also comes as tensions again rise over Iran's nuclear program. Since Trump unilaterally withdrew America from Tehran's nuclear accord with world powers in 2018, Iran slowly abandoned all the limits the deal put on its program.

Today, Tehran enriches uranium up to 60% purity—a short technical step from weapons-grade levels of 90%. Its stockpile of enriched uranium also continues to grow and international inspectors face challenges in monitoring its advances.

Lewis said he expects to see the space program accelerate given Raisi's interest.

"They're not constrained by worries about the Iran deal in the same way that Rouhani was," he said.

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Citation: Satellite images, expert suggest Iranian space launch coming (2021, December 12) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2021-12-satellite-images-expert-iranian-space.html>

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