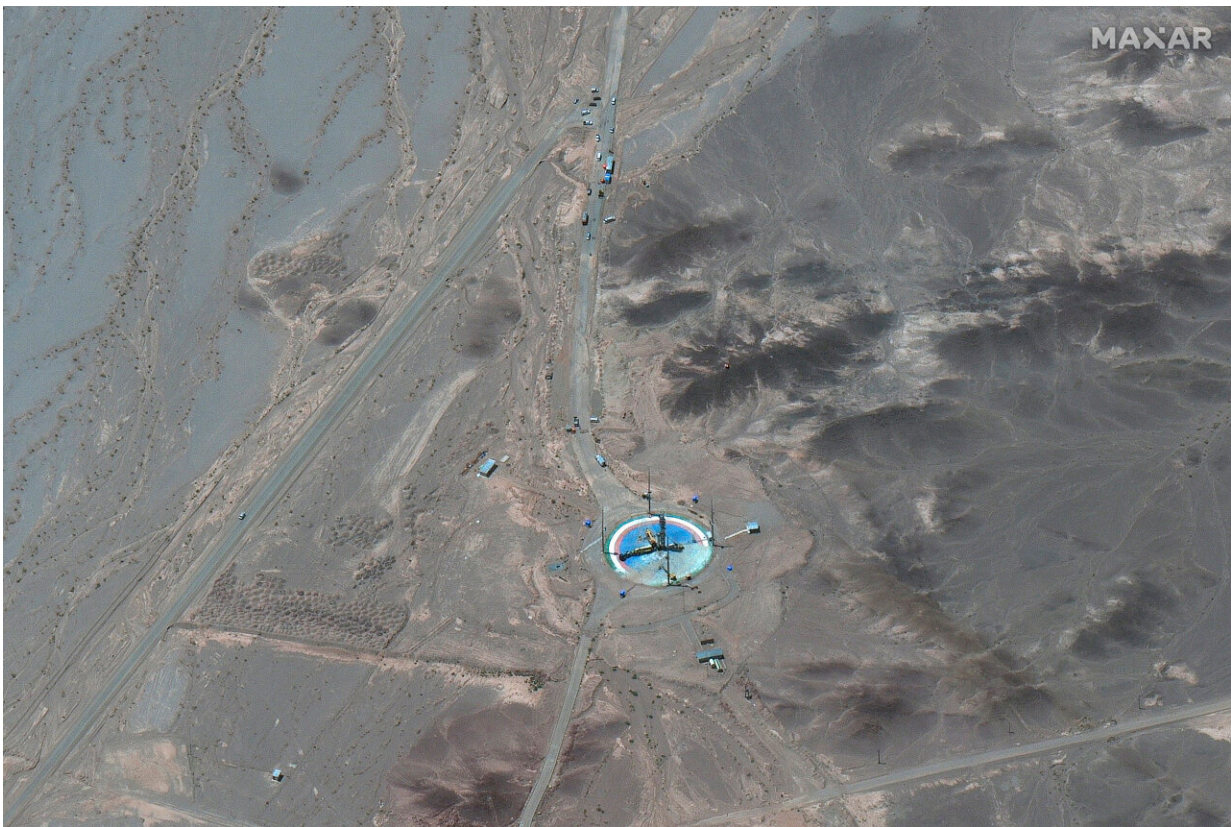


Satellite images suggest Iran preparing for rocket launch

June 14 2022, by Jon Gambrell



This satellite image from Maxar Technologies shows an overview of launch pad activity at Imam Khomeini Space Center southeast of Semnan, Iran on Tuesday, June 14, 2022. Iran appeared to be readying for a space launch Tuesday as satellite images showed a rocket on a rural desert launch pad, just as tensions remain high over Tehran's nuclear program. The images from Maxar Technologies showed a launch pad at Imam Khomeini Spaceport in Iran's rural Semnan province, the site of frequent recent failed attempts to put a satellite into orbit. Credit: Satellite image ©2022 Maxar Technologies via AP

Iran appeared to be readying for a space launch Tuesday as satellite images showed a rocket on a rural desert launch pad, just as tensions remain high over Tehran's nuclear program.

The images from Maxar Technologies showed a launch pad at Imam Khomeini Spaceport in Iran's rural Semnan province, the site of frequent recent failed attempts to put a satellite into orbit.

One set of images showed a rocket on a transporter, preparing to be lifted and put on a launch tower. A later image Tuesday afternoon showed the rocket apparently on the tower.

Iran did not acknowledge a forthcoming launch at the spaceport and its mission to the United Nations in New York did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

However, its state-run IRNA news agency in May said that Iran likely would have seven homemade satellites ready for launch by the end of the Persian calendar year in March 2023. A Defense Ministry official also recently suggested Iran soon could test its new solid-fueled, satellite-carrying rocket called the Zuljanah.

It wasn't clear when the launch would take place, though erecting a rocket typically means a launch is imminent. NASA fire satellites, which detect flashes of light from space, did not immediately see any activity over the site late Tuesday night.



This satellite image from Maxar Technologies shows vehicles at the checkout building at Imam Khomeini Space Center southeast of Semnan, Iran on Tuesday, June 14, 2022. Iran appeared to be readying for a space launch Tuesday as satellite images showed a rocket on a rural desert launch pad, just as tensions remain high over Tehran's nuclear program. The images from Maxar Technologies showed a launch pad at Imam Khomeini Spaceport in Iran's rural Semnan province, the site of frequent recent failed attempts to put a satellite into orbit. Credit: Satellite image ©2022 Maxar Technologies via AP

Asked about the preparations, State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters in Washington that the U.S. urges Iran to de-escalate the situation.

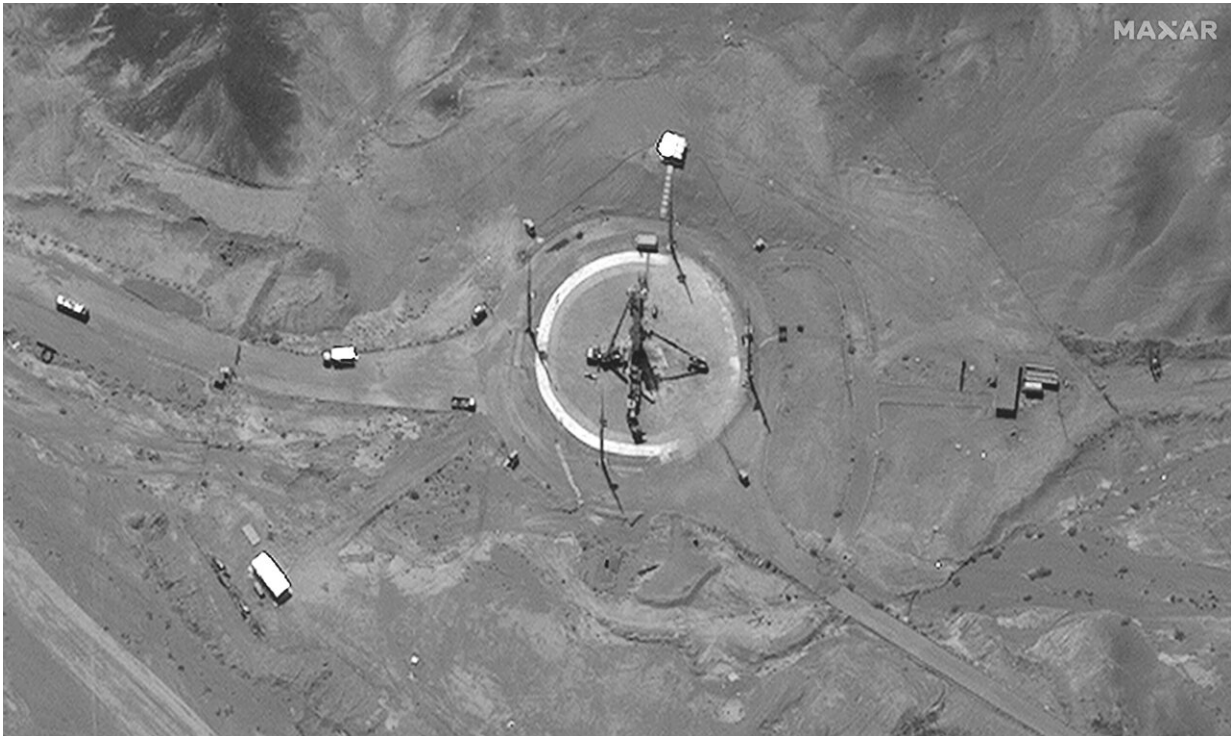
"Iran has consistently chosen to escalate tensions. It is Iran that has consistently chosen to take provocative actions," Price said.

A Pentagon spokesman, U.S. Army Maj. Rob Lodewick, said the American military "will continue to closely monitor Iran's pursuit of viable space launch technology and how it may relate to advancements in its overall ballistic missile program."

"Iranian aggression, to include the demonstrated threat posed by its various missile programs, continues to be a top concern for our forces in the region," Lodewick said.

Over the past decade, Iran has sent several short-lived satellites into orbit and in 2013 launched a monkey into space. The program has seen recent troubles, however. [There have been five failed launches in a row for the Simorgh program](#), a type of satellite-carrying rocket. A fire at the Imam Khomeini Spaceport in February 2019 also killed three researchers, authorities said at the time.

The launch pad used in Tuesday's preparations remains scarred from an explosion in August 2019 that even drew the attention of then-President Donald Trump. He later tweeted what appeared to be a classified surveillance image of the launch failure. Satellite images from February suggested a failed Zuljanah launch earlier this year, though Iran did not acknowledge it.



This satellite image from Maxar Technologies shows a rocket erected at a launch pad at Imam Khomeini Space Center in Iran on Tuesday, June 14, 2022. Iran appeared to be readying for a space launch Tuesday as satellite images showed a rocket on a rural desert launch pad, just as tensions remain high over Tehran's nuclear program. The images from Maxar Technologies showed a launch pad at Imam Khomeini Spaceport in Iran's rural Semnan province, the site of frequent recent failed attempts to put a satellite into orbit. Credit: Satellite image ©2022 Maxar Technologies via AP

The successive failures raised suspicion of outside interference in Iran's program, something Trump himself hinted at by tweeting at the time that the U.S. "was not involved in the catastrophic accident." There's been no evidence offered, however, to show foul play in any of the failures, and space launches remain challenging even for the world's most successful programs.

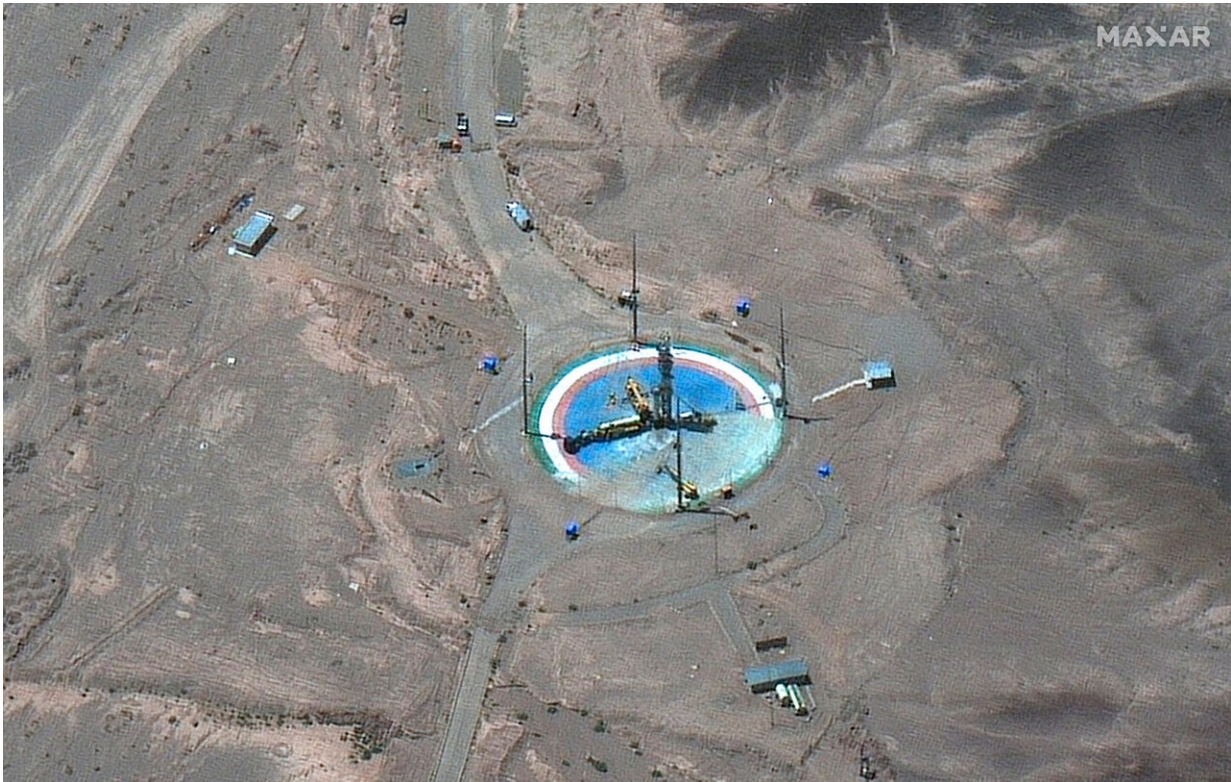
Meanwhile, Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard in April 2020 revealed its own secret space program by successfully launching a satellite into orbit. The Guard launched another satellite this March at another site in Semnan province, just east of the Iranian capital of Tehran.

Judging from the launch pad used, Iran likely is preparing for the Zuljanah test launch, said John Krzyzaniak, a research associate at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. Krzyzaniak earlier this week suggested a launch was imminent based on activity at the site.

The rocket's name, Zuljanah, comes from the horse of Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. Iranian state television aired footage of a successful Zuljanah launch in February 2021.

The launch preparations also come as the Guard reportedly saw one of its soldiers "martyred" in Semnan province under unclear circumstances over the weekend. Iran's Defense and Armed Forces Logistics Ministry, however, later claimed the man worked for it.

The United States has alleged that Iran's satellite launches defy a U.N. Security Council resolution and has called on Tehran to undertake no activity related to ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons. The U.S. intelligence community's 2022 threat assessment, published in March, claims such a satellite launch vehicle "shortens the timeline" to an intercontinental ballistic missile for Iran as it uses "similar technologies."



This satellite image from Maxar Technologies shows a rocket preparing to be erected at a launch pad at Imam Khomeini Space Center southeast of Semnan, Iran on Tuesday, June 14, 2022. Iran appeared to be readying for a space launch Tuesday as satellite images showed a rocket on a rural desert launch pad, just as tensions remain high over Tehran's nuclear program. The images from Maxar Technologies showed a launch pad at Imam Khomeini Spaceport in Iran's rural Semnan province, the site of frequent recent failed attempts to put a satellite into orbit. Credit: Satellite image ©2022 Maxar Technologies via AP

Iran, which has long said it does not seek nuclear weapons, previously maintained that its satellite launches and rocket tests do not have a military component. U.S. intelligence agencies and the International Atomic Energy Agency say Iran abandoned an organized military nuclear program in 2003.

However, Iran's likely preparations for a launch come as tensions have been heightened in recent days over Tehran's nuclear program. Iran now says it will remove 27 IAEA surveillance cameras from its nuclear sites as it now enriches uranium closer than ever to weapons-grade levels.

Both Iran and the U.S. insist they are willing to re-enter Tehran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers, which saw the Islamic Republic drastically curb its enrichment in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions. Trump unilaterally withdrew America from the accord in 2018, setting in motion a series of attacks and confrontations beginning in 2019 that continue today into the administration of President Joe Biden.

Talks in Vienna about reviving the deal have been on a "pause" since March.

Building a nuclear bomb would still take Iran more time if it pursued a weapon, analysts say, though they warn Tehran's advances make the program more dangerous. Israel has threatened in the past that it would carry out a preemptive strike to stop Iran—and already is suspected in a series of recent killings targeting Iranian officials.

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Citation: Satellite images suggest Iran preparing for rocket launch (2022, June 14) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-06-satellite-images-iran-rocket.html>

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