

# Saudi Arabia to send its first woman into space

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The first Saudi woman is to take part in a mission to the International Space Station in the spring of 2023.

Saudi Arabia will send its first ever woman astronaut on a space mission later this year, the latest move by the kingdom to revamp its ultra-conservative image.

Rayyana Barnawi will join fellow Saudi Ali Al-Qarni on a 10-day mission to the International Space Station (ISS), the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA) said.

Barnawi and Al-Qarni will fly to the ISS aboard a SpaceX Dragon spacecraft as part of a mission this spring by the private space company Axiom Space, SPA and Axiom said.

Also on board Ax-2 will be Peggy Whitson, a former NASA astronaut who will be making her fourth flight to the ISS, and John Shoffner, a businessman from Tennessee who will serve as pilot.

The Ax-2 crew will be launched to the ISS by a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket from Launch Complex 39A at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

Oil-rich Saudi Arabia will be following in the footsteps of the neighboring United Arab Emirates, which in 2019 became the first Arab country to send one of its citizens into space.

Astronaut Hazzaa al-Mansoori spent eight days on the ISS. Another fellow Emirati, Sultan al-Neyadi, will also make a voyage to the space station later this month.

Nicknamed the "Sultan of Space", the 41-year-old Neyadi will become the first Arab astronaut to spend six months in space when he blasts off for the ISS aboard a Falcon 9 rocket.

Gulf monarchies have been seeking to diversify their energy-reliant economies through a plethora of projects.

Saudi de facto leader Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has also been trying to shake off the kingdom's austere image through a push for

reforms.

Since his rise to power in 2017, women have been allowed to drive and to travel abroad without a male guardian, and their proportion in the workforce has more than doubled since 2016, from 17 percent to 37 percent.

Saudi Arabia's foray into space is not its first, however.

In 1985, Saudi royal Prince Sultan bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, an air force pilot, took part in a US-organized space mission, becoming the first Arab Muslim to travel into space.

In 2018, Saudi Arabia set up a space program and last year launched another to send astronauts into space, all part of Prince Salman's Vision 2030 agenda for economic diversification.

Axiom Space carried out its first private astronaut mission to the ISS in April 2022. Four private astronauts spent 17 days in orbit as part of Ax-1.

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