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Israel enters 'exclusive' club of countries to aim for the moon

Genesis spacecraft lifts off from Cape Canaveral and is expected to attempt a lunar landing on April 11 • "We are a small country, but gigantic in our achievements and our ability to innovate," says PM Netanyahu from the control center in central Israel.

Ilan Gattegno, Niv Lilien, News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff // published on 22/02/2019

Israel's first spacecraft designed to land on the moon lifts off from Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in Florida, early Friday | Photo: Reuters

An Israeli spacecraft rocketed toward the moon overnight Thursday for the country's first attempted lunar landing, following a launch from Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in Florida by SpaceX.

A communications satellite for Indonesia was the main cargo aboard the Falcon 9 rocket, which illuminated the sky as it took flight. But Israel's privately funded lunar lander – a first not just for Israel but commercial space – generated the buzz.

Israel seeks to become only the fourth country to successfully land on the moon, after Russia, the U.S. and China. The spacecraft – called Beresheet, Hebrew for Genesis or "In the Beginning" – will take nearly two months to reach the moon.

"We thought it's about time for a change, and we want to get little Israel all the way to the moon," said Yonatan Winetraub, co-founder of Israel's SpaceIL, a nonprofit organization behind the effort.

The moon, nearly full and glowing brightly, beckoned as it rose in the eastern sky. Within an hour after liftoff, Beresheet was already sending back data and had successfully deployed its landing legs, according to SpaceIL.

"We'll keep analyzing the data, but bottom line is we entered the very exclusive group of countries that have launched a spacecraft to the moon," said Yigal Harel, head of SpaceIL's spacecraft program. He said it was thrilling to witness the launch in person and to know Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was watching it live from the control center in Yehud, Israel.

Eliran Avital

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his wife, Sara, watch the Genesis launch from the control center in Yehud

"Four countries have launched a spacecraft to the moon. One of them is 800 times bigger than us, one is 500 times bigger and another is a little less than that. We are a small country, but gigantic in our achievements and our ability to innovate. I hope they are already planning a spacecraft to Mars," Netanyahu said.

The four-legged Beresheet, barely the size of a washing machine, will circle Earth in ever larger loops until it's captured by lunar gravity and goes into orbit around the moon. Touchdown would be April 11 at the Sea of Serenity.

The Beresheet mission originally was part of the Google Lunar XPrize competition and even made the final cut before the contest ended last year without a winner. The organizers decided to press ahead on their own, and the project was financed largely by Dr. Miriam and Sheldon Adelson together with SpaceIL president and billionaire high-tech developer Morris Kahn, as well as other donors from around the world.

"I have faith we will succeed [in landing on the moon]," Kahn told Israel Hayom. "We will meet to celebrate on April 11."

NASA's Apollo missions in the 1960s and 1970s took about three days to get astronauts to the moon, but they used monstrous Saturn V rockets. The \$100 million Beresheet mission couldn't afford its own rocket – even a little one – so the organizers opted for a ride share. That makes for a much longer trip; the moon right now is nearly 230,000 miles (370,000 kilometers) away.

"This is Uber-style space exploration, so we're riding shotgun on the rocket," Winetraub explained at a news conference on the eve of launch.

Science and Technology Minister Ofir Akunis said: "We are witness to one of the historical benchmarks of the State of Israel. [It is] an occasion of pride and industriousness, thought and trailblazing Israeli innovation. We are a technological power and a hotbed for minds that think outside the box. It was proven today that great dreams lead to even greater reality."

The U.S. Air Force also has a small research spacecraft aboard the rocket, for a one-year mission in orbit around Earth.

The Soviet Union was the first to put a spacecraft on the moon, Luna 2, in 1959. NASA followed with the Ranger 4 spacecraft in 1962. Last month, China became the first country to land on the far side of the moon

Apollo 11 moonwalker Buzz Aldrin quickly offered congratulations following Thursday's launch. So did NASA Administrator Jim Bridenstine, who called it "a historic step for all

nations and commercial space as we look to extend our collaborations beyond low-Earth orbit and on to the moon." NASA has a laser reflector aboard Beresheet and is offering its Deep Space Network for communication.

"All the best to @TeamSpaceIL as it starts its journey tonight on a @SpaceX #Falcon9 from Florida to my old stomping ground ...the moon," Aldrin tweeted.

Lunar surface operations are meant to last just two days. Beresheet will measure the magnetic field at the landing site, and send back data and pictures. A time capsule is aboard the lander – which includes a picture of Israeli astronaut Ilan Ramon, who died aboard space shuttle Columbia in 2003 – as well as a lunar library containing 30 million pages on a disk from the U.S.-based Arch Mission Foundation.

Ramon's widow, Rona, was a big supporter of Beresheet; she died of cancer in December.

Following liftoff, SpaceX recovered the first-stage booster, which flew twice last year. The booster landed smoothly on an offshore ocean platform, after the hottest re-entry yet, according to SpaceX founder and chief executive Elon Musk. Sparks from burning metal were visible in the landing video.

Musk said the booster will fly a fourth time in April, during a launch abort test of the new crew Dragon capsule. No one will be aboard.

The Adelson family owns the company that is the primary shareholder in Israel Hayom. Dr. Miriam Adelson is the publisher of Israel Hayom.

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Putin, Netanyahu to meet in Moscow next week

Netanyahu to meet Russian president on Wednesday, a week after meeting was scrapped due to last-minute political developments • Netanyahu expected to raise the alarm over Iran's ongoing military presence in Syria, talk about deconfliction mechanism.

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin | Photo: AP

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on Feb. 27, Netanyahu's office said on Thursday, with the focus likely to be on Middle East issues led by Syria.

The two leaders had been scheduled to meet this week, but that was postponed, apparently because of the intense election campaign. At the time, the Kremlin said Netanyahu and Putin were to discuss the situation in the Middle East, including Syria.

Thursday's statement offered no further details.

Israel's air force has repeatedly attacked what it describes as Iranian targets in Syria, saying it would not let Tehran use the Syrian civil war as cover for establishing a permanent presence on its northern border.

The air strikes have long caused friction between Israel and Russia, which apart from Iran is Syrian President Bashar Assad's other major foreign backer. In September 2018, Syrian forces accidentally shot down a Russian cargo plane carrying 15 troops after mistaking it for an Israeli aircraft.

A hotline set up in 2015 is aimed at ensuring Russian forces in Syria are not surprised by Israeli attacks. That line, often referred to as a "deconfliction mechanism," will probably also come up at the summit on Wednesday as both sides seek to avoid another incident like the one in September.

Israeli officials have spoken in the past of an agreement with Moscow under which they have made clear their strikes on Syria would not threaten Assad, while Russia has promised to help limit Iranian influence near the Israeli frontier.

Thursday 21.02.2019

UN envoy says risk of Israeli-Palestinian war looms large

Hamas' continuing control of Gaza, severe restrictions on movement imposed by Israel, "and the Palestinian Authority's restrictive measures are pushing the situation to a breaking point," U.N. Mideast envoy Nikolay Mladenov tells Security Council.

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Middle East envoy Nikolay Mladenov | Photo: United Nations

The prospect of peace between Israel and the Palestinians is fading by the day as violence and radicalism grow – and "the risk of war continues to loom large," the U.N. Mideast envoy warned Wednesday.

Nikolay Mladenov also told the U.N. Security Council that a negotiated two-state solution is drifting further away.

"What is needed, first and foremost, is the necessary leadership and political will for change," he said. "Until that will can be found, Palestinians and Israelis will continue to slide into increasingly hazardous territory."

Mladenov stressed that leaders must believe peace is possible through negotiations – and that leaders and the international community must be committed to supporting Israelis and Palestinians to reach a peace deal based on U.N. resolutions and bilateral agreements.

He said the international community must also understand "that the weaker party – the Palestinian people who have lived under occupation for more than 50 years – need our support more than ever."

"Unfortunately, unilateral measures, continuing violence, financial pressures and the lack of progress towards peace are exacting a heavy toll on Palestinian society and undermining the foundations of peace," Mladenov said.

He said Hamas' continuing control of Gaza, severe restrictions on movement imposed by Israel, "and the Palestinian Authority's restrictive measures are pushing the situation to a breaking point."

"The militant build-up continues as the risk of ever more radical and extremist groups pushing both sides into war grows by the day," the U.N. envoy warned.

He said that with prospects of reconciliation between Palestinian factions Fatah and Hamas are dimming, people in Gaza "feel more and more left to their own devices – with no representation, no relief and no way out."

Last month, Mladenov outlined steps to support stability for the Palestinian Authority including expanded trade opportunities, addressing financial issues, increasing services for its people, and ensuring security coordination with Israel.

He said these measures "are not a substitute for peace."

These must be matched by Israel, he said, including ending its policy of settlement construction and expansion and creating opportunities for Palestinian development in Area C in the West Bank.

Thursday 21.02.2019

Saudi crown prince backs India's fight against terrorism

Indian PM Narendra Modi under pressure to punish Pakistan over recent suicide bombing in Kashmir • Crown Prince Mohammed: Saudi Arabia and India share views on counterterrorism • Bilateral trade between India, Saudis reached \$27.5 billion in 2018.

Associated Press and Israel Hayom Staff // published on 21/02/2019

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, right, shakes hand with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman before the start of their meeting in New Delhi, Wednesday | Photo: AP

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on Wednesday offered intelligence sharing and other cooperation with India in fighting extremism and terrorism, as New Delhi tackled rising tensions with Pakistan following a suicide bombing last week on Indian paramilitary soldiers in disputed Kashmir.

The crown prince, with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi by his side, told reporters that he "shared India's concern on terrorism" but did not make any reference to Pakistan.

Modi is under heavy pressure from his supporters to punish Pakistan. India has placed the blame for the bombing squarely on Pakistan, which it accuses of supporting rebels in Kashmir, a charge that Islamabad denies.

Modi in his remarks to reporters referred to the attack and said steps would be taken to punish the perpetrators and their supporters. He didn't elaborate.

The crown prince said his visit will improve centuries-old ties between his country and India, which he said are "in our DNA."

"Saudi Arabia and India share views on increasing cooperation in counterterrorism and tackling cybercrimes," Modi said.

Modi also called for strong action for combating extremism so that the powers spreading violence and terror cannot mislead young people.

The two sides signed agreements on promoting investment, infrastructure, tourism, housing and communications. Their two-way trade totaled \$27.5 billion last year.

The Saudi side also signed a framework agreement on the International Solar Alliance, a treaty-based international body for the promotion of solar energy to reduce dependence on fossil fuels, according to India's External Affairs Ministry. It was launched by India and France on the sidelines of the 2015 Paris climate conference.

The agreement aims to create credit mechanisms, crowdfunding and sharing of technology to promote solar energy in 121 countries associated with the treaty.

Mohammed said he saw a potential for \$100 billion in investments in energy, agriculture, technology, culture and social services and said the two countries would evolve a strategy for mutual gain. He said **Saudi Arabia had invested \$44 billion in India since 2016.**

Last year, Saudi Aramco in partnership with the Abu Dhabi National Oil Co. signed an agreement with Indian oil companies to jointly build an integrated refinery and petrochemical project at Ratnagiri in the western Indian state of Maharashtra.

The crown prince's trip to India comes five months after he came under intense pressure following the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. In keeping with a long-standing policy of not commenting on countries' internal affairs, India declined to take a position on the Washington Post columnist's killing by suspected Saudi agents.

The crown prince arrived in India on Tuesday night after visiting cash-strapped Pakistan, which voiced support for him amid the international outcry over Khashoggi's killing. The Saudi delegation signed \$20 billion in investment deals and vowed to free thousands of Pakistani prisoners in Saudi custody.

India describes Saudi Arabia as a "key pillar" of its energy security. It provides about 17% of India's crude oil and about a third of its liquefied natural gas.

The relationship is likely to become more significant as a deadline nears for India to comply with U.S. sanctions against Iran, one of India's main oil providers.

Ties between India and Saudi Arabia, where millions of Indians are employed as migrant workers, have strengthened since Modi visited Riyadh in 2016 for the signing of a memorandum of understanding on cooperation with intelligence-gathering on money laundering and terrorism financing.

Mohammed was to make a two-day visit to China starting Thursday.