



## Spotlight on Iran



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### "The Islamic republic is looking for a monkey to fly the new fighter plane": web reactions to newly unveiled scientific achievements

The announcement released by the Iranian Space Agency on the launch of Iran's first monkey into space has drawn considerable interest from the media and social networks these past several days. In addition to expressions of pride in the achievement, there was also criticism of the fact that such enormous financial resources were invested in the space launch at a time that Iran's economy is in crisis. Some of the news website readers expressed their pride, while others had reservations about the launch and said that it was intended only for propaganda.

The doubts raised by media in the West over the reliability of the report on the space launch generated some interest in Iran as well. Earlier this week the Asr-e Iran website criticized the way that the directors of the Iranian Space Agency handled the affair and demanded that they release proof of their claim that the monkey was launched into space and returned safely to Earth.

Qaher-313, a new fighter plane with supposedly state-of-the-art technological capabilities unveiled on Saturday, February 2, is also drawing considerable interest online, as are the doubts raised by the West about this other achievement. Once again, expressions of pride over the report were mixed with criticism of the project's economic justification.

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The launch of the monkey into space also provoked some mocking reactions, which intensified in the wake of doubts over the reliability of the official report on the issue. The doubts were caused by differences between the pictures of the monkey before and after the space flight.

The report began drawing a great deal of interest from the media, news website readers, and social network users shortly after the release of the initial announcement on the launch of the monkey into space. A number of internet users expressed their pride in the allegedly successful launch and had praise for the Iranian scientists and the scientific achievement that they made. Other internet users, on the other hand, had reservations about conducting a space launch at a time that Iran's economy is faced with a crisis, and even argued that it was a move intended only for propaganda.

A reader on the Alef website said that it would be better if the ingenuity and impressive capabilities that went into the launch of the monkey into space could also be seen in the sphere of economy and foreign policy. Another internet user commented on the report about Iran's intention to launch its first astronaut into space in the future, and wondered why sending a man into space is more important than completing all the projects that the government has yet to complete across the country. "What is the point of launching a man into space with conditions being what they are right now?" yet another internet user wondered, claiming that the only purpose of the space launch was to send a message to the West that Iran is capable of carrying out such an experiment even when the sanctions imposed on the country are at their maximum.

The criticism over the considerable cost of the space launch intensified this weekend in the wake of a statement made by Dr. Hamid Fazeli, the head of the Iranian Space Agency, who said that the launch cost around 2 to 3 billion tomans. "Is the launch more important than bread on the people's table?" one internet user wondered. Another said that launching a monkey into space is a welcome move provided that it does not prevent those in charge of the country from taking care of the important matters facing Iran. Yet another internet user said that the space launch is without a doubt a source of national pride for every Iranian, but wondered if it was appropriate to carry it out at a time that the citizens of the country are plagued by severe economic problems.



Not all internet users joined in the criticism of the cost of the space launch. A number of them said they were satisfied with and proud of the achievement, arguing that it is incorrect to examine every scientific achievement through an economic lens and bring the price of bread into everything. While the government does have to solve the problems of the citizens, one internet user wrote, it also needs to think about the scientific achievements of the country. He noted that not everything should be measured against bread, and expressed his hope that the next government will be able to provide bread as well as guarantee Iran's dignity. His view was shared by another internet user, who said that it is incorrect to put everything on hold for the sake of bread: the missile industry, the space program, nuclear energy, cinema, soccer, universities, and entertainment centers.

In a response to those who support the launch of the monkey into space despite its high cost, one internet user said that while scientific progress really is important, there is no reason for such heavy expenses and adventurous experiments while the government can't even guarantee the basic needs of its citizens. Countries with similar levels of technology make the living conditions of their citizens their first priority, he added.

The launch of the monkey, named "Aftab", also drew satirical comments from internet users. A blogger posted an "exclusive interview" with the monkey, who talked about the experiences he had had during the training period and the space flight itself. The monkey "admitted" that he was forced to volunteer for the mission after being abducted by the Ministry of Intelligence and transferred to Evin prison in Tehran, where he

underwent harsh interrogations in which he was accused of being a rabbit. He eventually cracked under the pressure and volunteered “to go out into Islamic space to eliminate the oppressive Israel and the imperialist America”, on the condition that he would be recognized as a “Basij astronaut”.



The monkey went on to say that a considerable portion of his training was dedicated to prayer, fasting, and spiritual strengthening. He was unable to move during his time in space since he was tied to his seat, which is why his routine consisted mostly of praying and listening to speeches given by radical cleric Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi and Guardian Council chairman Ahmad Jannati. He was also greatly influenced by the sermons of Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami, Tehran’s Friday prayer leader. He added that, at one point, he was unsure whether he was allowed by Islamic law to perform his religious duties during his time in space, which got him into a spiritual crisis. To strengthen his spirit, the ground control station created a live video session with the monkey during which he was read fragments from sermons delivered by two top conservative clerics Ayatollah Safi Golpayegani and Ayatollah Nasser Makarem Shirazi. This put the “light of faith” back in his heart.

When asked about his plans for the future, the monkey replied that there are projects in the works to launch Muslims into space and then to heaven, and also to discover a planet with the right conditions for public prayer. At the end of the “interview”, the monkey said he would like to share several slogans with the readers (in a paraphrase of the slogans commonly heard during the Iran-Iraq War): “The way to Jerusalem goes through Mars”, “War, war, until the conquest of the Sun in space”, “Rocket, rocket until victory”, “God, God, watch over [Ahmad] Jannati until the next galaxy” ([http://kerdarnik.blogspot.com/2013/02/blog-post\\_5091.html](http://kerdarnik.blogspot.com/2013/02/blog-post_5091.html)).

The daily Qanun also released an “interview” with the space-faring monkey. In the interview, which was then reposted on the Fararu website, the monkey said that it was his economic distress that made him go to space. Even though he has been working for 10 years, he still has no insurance and he hasn’t received a paycheck in 6 months. He couldn’t buy bananas for his family as a result of the price increases. He used to buy bananas for his wife who then made banana milk for their children, but that is not possible anymore. Working in the circus is no longer an option either, he said, because the economic crisis does not allow the people to spend money on circus entertainment. This is why he was forced to go on a mission to space.

When asked whether he would agree to take part in another launch into space, the monkey said that he would not. Given last week’s arrest of several journalists affiliated with the reformists by Iran’s authorities, the monkey suggested sending journalists instead of monkeys next time, on the condition that—unlike the monkey—they do not come back (Fararu, January 31).

As could be expected, the doubts on the reliability of the report about the launch of the monkey into space drew mocking comments from news website readers and social network users. The Asr-e Iran website, too, criticized the way that the directors of the Iranian Space Agency handled the affair and demanded that they release proof of their claim that the monkey was launched into space and returned safely to Earth.



The website said that the very fact that Iran has reached the level of science and technology that allows it to make achievements in space exploration is a source of pride for all Iranians. Even if the recent experiment ended in a failure, there is nothing

wrong with that, since malfunctions and errors in experiments having to do with the space industry are commonplace and acceptable even in such countries as the United States, Russia, and China. Iran's entry into the domain of space is more important than defeat or victory in any particular experiment.

However, Asr-e Iran criticized the way that the directors of the Iranian Space Agency handled Western media reports on the differences between the images of the monkey before and after the launch, which made a top official at the agency go on record on February 3 saying that some of the pictures released by the Western media were archive photos taken during the launch preparation stage of the project, in which a number of different monkeys were used.

The website argued that the launch video posted on the official website of the Iranian Space Agency not only did not put the rumors to rest but quite on the contrary further contributed to the doubts surrounding the issue, since it too shows considerable differences between the pictures of the monkey before and after the space flight. The rumors that have come up on the issue generate doubts over Iran's technological progress in space exploration and the directors of the agency should therefore release filmed evidence and honestly admit the errors made during their work. They should know that Iran's acquisition of space technology is much more valuable than these and other similarly inconsequential issues (Asr-e Iran, February 2).

Qaher-313, a new fighter plane with supposedly state-of-the-art technological capabilities unveiled on Saturday, February 2, is also drawing considerable interest online, as are the doubts raised by the West about this other achievement. Once again, expressions of pride over this report by some news website readers were mixed with criticism and mockery. One reader on the Alef website said that it would be better to curb the inflation rate instead of building an advanced fighter plane. An exiled Iranian blogger commented on the newly unveiled fighter plane by posting a report saying that, having successfully completed the experiment of launching the monkey into space and returning it to Earth, and having unveiled the new Qaher-313 fighter plane, the Islamic republic is now looking for a "donkey monkey" to fly the new fighter plane (<http://tweatter.blogspot.ca/2013/02/blog-post.html>).