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THE ORIGIN OF THE ASTRONAUT PROGRAM IN ISRAEL

**Abstract**

The paper will portray the origins led to the Israeli astronaut project – that culminated in the space-flight of Israel's first astronaut colonel Ilan Ramon, on the space shuttle Columbia on the STS-107 mission, that ended in tragedy just minutes before landing on February 1st, 2003.

The background of the program will be discussed, starting with the bilateral talks between the US and Israel, on top level, following the agreement signed between NASA and ISA (Israel Space Agency), and the joint ISA – Israel Air Force negotiations on the selection of the astronaut as well as funding required to fulfill the mission.

The author's personal and connection to ISA, Israel Air Force and the Ramon family have yielded a load of inside information, documents and personal recollections on the beginning of the program. On the technical side of the mission, the MEIDEX experiment will also be addressed – as it was a requirement by NASA – enabling the mission of Ilan Ramon as a payload specialist.

The story of Israel's astronaut project is a ground for a thorough – and needed – research on an academic level. Although the theme was covered in popular books and media, the story is yet to be addressed as practiced by the IAA history committee symposia.