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Iran launches Rasad 1 'observation' satellite

• By YAAKOV KATZ

Iran increased its presence in space on Wednesday with the successful launch of a new satellite.

Israel is concerned that Tehran's space program is cover for the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) that could carry nuclear warheads.

The Islamic Republic's Arabic language Al-

Alam television channel reported that a satellite called Rasad 1, "observation" in Farsi, was launched aboard an improved satellite launch vehicle and will be used for transmitting images and weather forecasts.

The Rasad 1 is the second satellite Iran has launched into space. In February 2009, Iran launched the Omid satellite, "hope" in Farsi,

See SATELLITE, Page 10

SATELLITE

Continued from Page 1

and is in the midst of an ambitious space program with plans to launch a larger satellite from a new launch vehicle called Simorgh in the coming year.

Israel closely tracked the missile launch with various sensors, including the X-Band radar that the US stationed in the Negev in late 2008.

Tal Inbar, head of the Space Research Center at the Fisher Brothers Institute for Air and Space Studies in Herzliya, raised the possibility that Tehran's space program was a cover to develop military-grade ballistic missiles but said the satellite itself did not have a real military application.

"Rasad 1 is an Iranian observation satellite with resolution of about 150 meters and no real military importance," Inbar said. "It is, however, a remote-sensing satellite and for the Iranians this has declarative importance since they can say that they were able to put an imaging satellite in space."

Reuters contributed to the report.