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From Nabeul to the Moon: Mehdi Benna, the Tunisian who will listen to the lunar South Pole

On September 30, 2026, NASA chose three science experiments to prepare its base on the Moon. One of them is led by a graduate of ENIT in Tunis, an engineer who first dreamed of the stars in an astronomy club in Nabeul.

BY THE **EDITORS** · DECEMBER 1, 2026 · 5 MIN READ



Dr. Mehdi Benna, principal investigator of the LEMS station, at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center. Photo: NASA.

When NASA released, on September 30, 2026, the list of three science experiments selected to prepare its future lunar base, one name made many Tunisian hearts beat a little faster: Dr. Mehdi Benna, of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), principal investigator of LEMS-SP. His mission: to install at the Moon's South Pole a self-sufficient station that will monitor moonquakes, micrometeorite impacts and the gases present at the surface. Put simply, to tell the base's future residents what the Moon has in store for them.

For the Nabeul-born planetary scientist, the selection crowns more than twenty years of work at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center in Maryland. It also fulfills a childhood dream: that of a boy from Cap Bon, a member of an astronomy club, who looked up at the sky and wondered what it was made of.

A science buoy for the Moon

The idea for LEMS, short for Lunar Environment Monitoring Station, was born in 2018. The starting point is simple: everything humanity knows about moonquakes comes from instruments left behind by the Apollo missions, placed on the near side, close to the equator. The South Pole, where NASA wants to establish a lasting presence because it holds water ice, remains silent territory.

> **“Our vision was to create a scientific buoy for the Moon.”**
>
> MEHDI BENNA, NASA, AUGUST 2026

Like a buoy at sea, the station has to fend for itself. About the size of a small suitcase, it carries two seismometers and must survive the lunar night without heating, when temperatures plunge to around -400 °F (-240 °C). In August 2026, NASA announced that LEMS was the first instrument designed to be deployed by astronauts to be fully completed. It now awaits its journey to the Moon in a clean room at Goddard. Its version for the lunar base, LEMS-SP, was selected by NASA on September 30, 2026.

HIS JOURNEY AT A GLANCE

Nabeul	Grows up on Cap Bon, a member of an astronomy club.
1999	Engineering degree in electrical engineering, École nationale d'ingénieurs de Tunis (ENIT).
2000	Master's degree in telecommunications, University of Tunis.
2002	PhD from Paul Sabatier University in Toulouse, France.
2003	Joins NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center as a postdoctoral researcher.
2006	Senior research scientist in planetary science, NASA Goddard and UMBC.
2026	UMBC Research Excellence Award; NASA selects LEMS-SP for its lunar base.

From ENIT to Maryland

Mehdi Benna's journey began at the École nationale d'ingénieurs de Tunis, from which he graduated as an electrical engineer in 1999. He went on to earn a master's degree in telecommunications at the University of Tunis, then a PhD at Paul Sabatier University in Toulouse, completed in 2002. After a stint at the Midi-Pyrénées Observatory, he crossed the Atlantic: in March 2003, he joined NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center as a postdoctoral researcher. Three years later, he became a senior research scientist in planetary science there.

Since then, his name has appeared on the teams of some of the most remarkable missions in solar system exploration. He is a co-investigator and the instrument lead for NGIMS aboard the MAVEN spacecraft, which studies the atmosphere of Mars. He has worked on the spectrometer of the LADEE lunar mission, the SAM instrument on the Curiosity rover, MESSENGER at Mercury, the European Rosetta mission and the MOMA instrument of the ExoMars program.

“It works!”

Asked by NASA about his fondest career memory, Mehdi Benna does not mention an award. He describes the arrival of the first data from the SAM instrument, sent from the surface of Mars, and the cry he let out at that moment: “IT WORKS!!!” That says everything about the man: an engineer for whom the greatest reward is still seeing an instrument work millions of miles away.

Yet the honors are many. In 2014, he received NASA's Exceptional Engineering Achievement Medal. He counts thirteen NASA group achievement awards, several Goddard honors and, in 2026, UMBC's Research Excellence Award, which recognizes more than 160 peer-reviewed scientific papers. In his spare time, he is also a commercial pilot: even outside the lab, Mehdi Benna keeps his head in the sky.

A Tunisian at the heart of the return to the Moon

With the Artemis program, humanity is preparing to return to the Moon, this time to stay. That one of the experiments tasked with making that stay safer is led by an engineer trained in Tunisia speaks volumes about the quality of Tunisian engineering education and the boldness of those it produces. Back in 2018, invited by the Tunisian Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts, he came home to share his story with the young people of his country.

Today, when an ENIT student looks up at the Moon, they can tell themselves that one of their own is up there, preparing the future.

TUNISIAN PRIDE

From an astronomy club in Nabeul to the South Pole of the Moon, Mehdi Benna shows that Tunisian talent has no ceiling. Not even the sky.

SOURCES

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Facts checked by the Tunisian Success editors in November 2026. Spotted an error? Write to us at contact@tunisiansuccess.com.