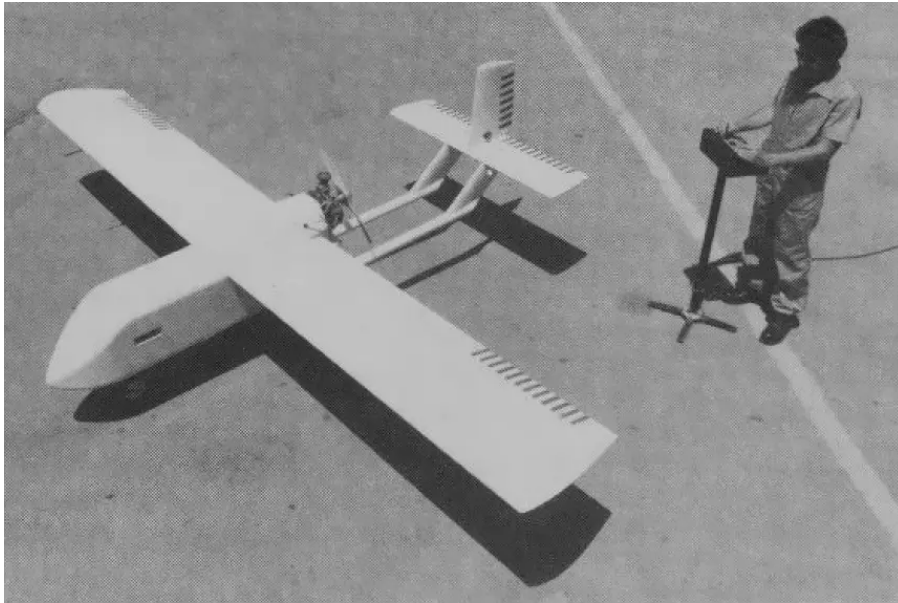




Israel was already using drones in 1982: the modern war was born in the skies of Lebanon

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When today we talk about military drones, real-time reconnaissance, and target identification, the mind inevitably turns to Ukraine, Gaza, or the most recent conflicts in the Middle East.

Yet, over forty years ago, in the skies of Lebanon, Israel had already begun using unmanned aircraft as an integral part of its military operations. During the 1982 war, the small **Tadiran Mastiff** and **IAI Scout** were employed to observe the battlefield, locate targets, track enemy force movements, and transmit images to Israeli commands.

They were not armed drones, they did not carry missiles, and they did not resemble the FPV quadcopters that today chase men and vehicles in the trenches.

Their task was to see without exposing a pilot, providing aircraft, artillery, and commanders with much faster terrain knowledge compared to traditional reconnaissance flights.

The most detailed historical documentation mainly concerns their use in the **Beqaa Valley**, against Syrian anti-aircraft batteries.



The Israeli reconnaissance drone IAI Scout 700, used in the early eighties for surveillance and target acquisition missions.

From the Yom Kippur War to the Mastiff and the Scout

Israeli interest in unmanned aircraft did not begin in 1982. Already between the late sixties and early seventies, Israel had experimented with small model aircraft equipped with cameras and had purchased Ryan Firebee drones from the United States. During the Yom Kippur War of 1973, target aircraft and decoy drones were also used to deceive Egyptian and Syrian defenses, forcing them to turn on radars or waste missiles on pilotless targets.

That war had shown how dangerous Soviet-made anti-aircraft systems were: the Israeli air force suffered significant losses and realized that the superiority of its pilots was no longer enough. Before attacking, it was necessary to identify the radars, recognize the frequencies used, track the movements of mobile batteries, and quickly transmit this information to those who would strike them.

In the second half of the seventies, the Israeli industry developed two aircraft destined to change the history of UAVs: the **Mastiff**, produced by Tadiran, and the **Scout**, made by Israel Aircraft Industries. They were small planes with a rear propeller, twin tail boom, and electro-optical systems installed on the underside of the fuselage.

They could remain in flight for several hours and send video images to the control station.

The Mastiff entered service in 1978, while the Scout was introduced shortly after. They were used in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions against Palestinian organizations in southern Lebanon and to monitor the growing Syrian deployment in the Beqaa Valley.

The novelty was not just the aircraft, but the ability to integrate what it saw with the command chain, artillery, aviation, and electronic warfare.



An IAI/Tadiran Mastiff III drone displayed at the Israeli Air Force Museum at Hatzerim Airbase, Israel. Photo taken in 2006 by Bukvoed/Wikimedia Commons.

June 9, 1982, and the destruction of Syrian defenses

The most striking demonstration occurred on **June 9, 1982**, during the Israeli operation known as **Mole Cricket 19**. In the Beqaa Valley, Syria had built a complex air defense network based on radar, anti-aircraft artillery, and missile batteries, including Soviet-made mobile SA-6s. It was a serious threat to any Israeli aircraft attempting to operate over Lebanon. To neutralize it, Israel did not just send its fighters against the batteries. It simultaneously employed reconnaissance drones, decoy aircraft, electronic jamming, anti-radar missiles, artillery, and combat aircraft.

Mastiff and Scout observed Syrian positions and provided images almost in real-time. Some drones or unmanned aircraft were also used as decoys, simulating the radar profile of an aircraft and prompting Syrian operators to activate systems or launch missiles.

When the radars were turned on, the emissions revealed their position and electronic characteristics. The data could be used for jamming, launching anti-radiation missiles, and

directing air and ground attacks. The UAVs also continued to monitor the targeted areas, allowing commanders to assess the damage and order a second attack only against still operational batteries.

The result immediately entered the history of military aviation. During the operations from June 9-11, the Syrian anti-aircraft system in the Beqaa was substantially dismantled, while dozens of Syrian aircraft were shot down in air combat. The exact figures vary depending on the accounts, but the military significance does not change: Israel had demonstrated that a modern anti-aircraft network could be disarticulated by connecting sensors, intelligence, electronic warfare, and weapon systems.

Drones did not win the battle alone and should not be turned into a miraculous weapon. However, they were one of the elements that made possible what we would today call a true multi-domain operation, based on the rapid sharing of information.



An Israeli Air Force F-4 Phantom II fighter-bomber flies over Beirut during the 1982 Lebanon War – Photo Wikimedia Commons.

Drones during the advance towards Beirut

While fighting was taking place in the Beqaa, Israeli forces advanced along southern Lebanon and the coast towards Beirut. The declared objective of the operation “Peace for Galilee” was to push Palestinian forces away from the Israeli border, but the offensive went much further north and led to the encirclement of the capital, where PLO fighters, commands, and infrastructure were concentrated. In this context, UAVs could conduct reconnaissance on communication routes, observe movements of men and vehicles, identify positions, and contribute to the

assessment of attacks.

Historical research confirms that, even before the invasion, Israeli drones were integrated both in the preparation of a possible conventional war with Syria and in daily operations against Palestinian organizations present in Lebanon.

However, it is necessary to avoid projecting today's technological capabilities onto 1982. Cameras had lower resolution, navigation did not have the satellite network and current digital connections, while image analysis largely depended on operators on the ground.

The Scouts and Mastiffs could not fly undisturbed everywhere nor automatically recognize a face, a weapon, or a license plate. Their revolutionary contribution was the continuity of observation: a small unmanned aircraft could monitor an area, follow a target, and transmit images without risking a crew. For an army engaged in a mountainous and densely populated territory, this possibility represented a considerable advantage.



Image attributed to Operation Mole Cricket 19, conducted by the Israeli Air Force on June 9, 1982, against Syrian anti-aircraft missile batteries in the Beqaa Valley. The footage shows vehicles and installations hit during the air defense suppression operations.

A revolution observed by the United States

The Israeli success of 1982 quickly attracted international attention, particularly from the United States. The American Navy understood that similar aircraft could be used for reconnaissance and for correcting the fire of large naval units. From the experience of the Mastiff and the Scout, the **RQ-2 Pioneer** program was born, developed with the collaboration of the US industry and subsequently employed by the US Navy, the Marines, and the US Army. The Pioneer would

become famous during the Gulf War of 1991, when it was used to observe Iraqi positions and direct naval fire.

The fundamental shift of 1982 was therefore mainly doctrinal. Before then, drones had already been used in war by the United States, Israel, and other countries, but often as targets, decoys, or relatively isolated photographic platforms. In Lebanon, the Israelis showed a more modern approach: the drone became a sensor connected to a larger system. The images contributed to building the operational situation, data was transmitted to commanders, and targets could be quickly assigned to aircraft or artillery. This combination of UAVs, electronic warfare, command and control, and guided munitions anticipated many features of 21st-century military operations.



An **RQ-2B Pioneer** reconnaissance drone of the U.S. Navy, assigned to the “Firebees” of Fleet Composite Squadron Six (VC-6), flies over the public during a demonstration at Naval Air Station Patuxent River in 2005. Developed from the Israeli experience with the UAV Scout and Mastiff, the Pioneer was acquired by the United States in **1985** and entered operational service with the Navy and Marine Corps in **1986**. The system provided real-time video images for reconnaissance, artillery and naval fire correction, and damage assessment. Photo: U.S. Navy/Photographer’s Mate 2nd Class Daniel J. McLain.

From Lebanon in 1982 to today's wars

Between the Mastiff of 1982 and today's drones, there is naturally a huge technological gap. Today, UAVs can fly for more than twenty-four hours, use radar, thermal sensors, artificial intelligence, satellite communications, and, in some cases, directly carry missiles and bombs. On the opposite end, small modified commercial drones can observe a trench, drop an explosive device, or transform into relatively low-cost FPV munitions.

In 1982, however, the Israeli drone was essentially a flying eye. But it was precisely that eye that changed the relationship between those observing the battlefield and those who had to make the decision to strike.

This is why the 1982 Lebanon War is considered a decisive milestone in the history of military drones. It was not the absolute birth of UAVs nor the first wartime use of an unmanned aircraft. However, it was one of the first convincing demonstrations of their systematic use within a complex operational network.

In the skies of Lebanon, during the advance towards Beirut and especially in the battle of the Beqaa, Israel showed that information control could be as important as firepower.

Forty years later, from the Ukrainian steppes to the cities of the Middle East, that lesson has become one of the central features of contemporary warfare.