

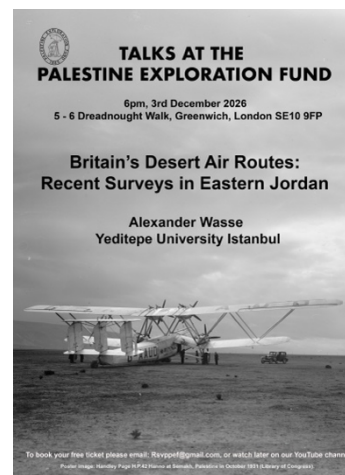
PEF EVENT

Thursday 3rd December 2026, 6pm

BRITAIN'S DESERT AIR ROUTES:

RECENT SURVEYS IN EASTERN JORDAN

- Alexander Wasse, Yeditepe University, Istanbul
- PEF, 5-6 Dreadnought Walk, Greenwich, London SE10 9FP
- Free, please email rsvppef@gmail.com to reserve your ticket/s



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Summary

In the Near East, geographical connections between Egypt and Mesopotamia are typically considered in the context of the Fertile Crescent. But what of the vast expanse of gravel plains and desert boulder fields in its embrace? Politically, this large region changed dramatically after the First World War, following the replacement of Ottoman rule by League of Nations' 'mandates' administered by Britain and France. In 1921, the desert shortcut – or corridor – through eastern Jordan and western Iraq was the scene of an ambitious imperial-communications experiment pioneered by the Royal Air Force (RAF). This saw Cairo and Baghdad connected by air, bringing traditional hunters and herders for whom this spectacular landscape was home face-to-face with cutting-edge aviation technology.

Established primarily as a military-operated air-mail link, the route was also a training ground for crews engaged in 'air-control' operations in Iraq. In 1926-27, Imperial Airways took over the route in the context of forging civilian air links between Britain and India, extending it all the way through to Australia in 1934. Owing to the featureless terrain between Amman in Trans-Jordan and Hinaidi/Habbaniya in Iraq, to say nothing of the potentially fatal consequences of navigational error, British military surveyors needed to ensure the safety of their pilots and crews. This part of the air route was created with ground markers, including directional arrows and a ploughed furrow for pilots to follow, lettered/numbered emergency landing grounds at approximately 30km intervals, and an accompanying track.

The route saw considerable evolution in the early 1930s, when the irregular line originally established by the RAF was straightened to create a non-stop route between Gaza and Rutbah. This was part of a far-reaching upgrade to the air route across the Middle East at this time, which for example saw the establishment of a rest house/fort and airfield at Sharjah in 1932.

Despite its age, much of the air-route infrastructure has until recently survived in remarkably good condition, having been protected by its isolation. However, with the rapid pace of modern development, key elements are increasingly threatened with destruction. Since 2024, the Desert Air Routes Project, working closely with the Aerial Archaeology in Jordan project, has sought to record what remains, to explore local engagement with and sentiment towards the air-route heritage, and to assess the lasting impact of these routes in Palestine/Israel, Jordan and Iraq. This lecture will highlight the importance of these routes in the development of long-distance air travel, as well as showcasing the results of the recent surveys on the ground and in the air.

About the Speaker

Alexander Wasse is a lecturer in Archaeology and Anthropology at Yeditepe University in Istanbul. Much of his research examines the development of hunter-forager and early food-producing societies in the Levant, Arabian peninsula and north Africa, with a focus on its geographical and/or ecological margins. He has since 2008 co-directed the Eastern Badia Archaeological Project in Jordan, and is active in Cyprus and Saudi Arabia. More recently, he has developed interests in 20th-century archaeology, specifically aviation and industrial heritage in the Middle East, as a counterpoint to his prehistoric research. Focusing on the desert air routes and pipelines, this work aligns with rapidly increasing scholarly interest in the contested colonial history of the region.

HOW TO FIND US

The PEF is situated on the south bank of the River Thames, a short walk away from Cutty Sark DLR station, Greenwich train and DLR station and Greenwich Pier (Riverbus).



