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## Chapter 1: History, Theory, and Literature Review

### I. Historical and Conceptual Background of Wasta

The concept of Wasta, is derived from the Arabic word meaning "intermediation" or "connection," transcends its common perception as a mere social convenience. It is a deeply embedded custom that has historically governed interpersonal transactions in Arab societies and continues to shape political and economic behavior in contemporary Middle Eastern states. Rather than being a peripheral cultural trait, Wasta constitutes a central organizing principle of access and authority, linking individuals to powerful entities and structures through personal intermediaries.

Historically, Wasta arose in the absence of formal legal mechanisms. Before the formation of modern nation states, where state structures were either weak or nonexistent, intermediaries, typically family or tribal elders played a pivotal role in conflict resolution, resource distribution, and leadership access (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993). These intermediaries were not only socially legitimate but also morally obligated to act on behalf of their kin, enacting governance based on trust, reputation, and reciprocal obligation.

This tribal logic persisted even as modern state structures emerged in the Middle East during the 20th century. Postcolonial nation-building introduced bureaucratic institutions modeled after Western governance. However, these often lacked legitimacy or reach. Rather than displacing informal systems, modern states absorbed and reshaped them. As a result, Wasta became the preferred method for navigating bureaucracy. In Jordan, Wasta was normalized in the public

sector, particularly in hiring, where tribal affiliation often superseded qualifications (Al-Ramahi, 2008). In the Gulf, rentier economies further entrenched Wasta. Herb (2005) argues that in Saudi Arabia, immense oil wealth established vast patronage networks through which state resources were informally distributed. Wasta thus became structurally embedded in the political economy, serving as a legitimizing tool and mechanism of social cohesion.

Moreover, the relationship between Wasta and state authority reveals a more complex pattern than simple resistance or accommodation. Many regimes have strategically allowed Wasta to persist to maintain political legitimacy, particularly in contexts where elections are limited or symbolic. Informal access to state resources becomes a currency of political loyalty. Cammett and Issar (2010) argue that informal networks often function as extensions of state power, enabling regimes to perform governance without institutionalizing accountability. This dynamic reinforces a hybrid model of governance where informal institutions are central to how power is exercised.

Today, Wasta exists along a spectrum from minor social courtesies to strategic interventions involving high-ranking officials. This reflects Wasta's adaptive capacity: it can operate in face-to-face negotiations or via digital platforms and is invoked across socioeconomic strata. In the public sector, where inefficiencies are common, Wasta is often necessary for securing services or employment. In the private sector, particularly in firms with international affiliations, Wasta is more constrained, yet not absent. Adham (2022) demonstrates that in Saudi corporations, hiring and promotion often reflect tribal or regional loyalty, masked by formal metrics. Thus, Wasta reshapes the contours of modern governance.

Importantly, the contemporary use of Wasta is not confined to the less privileged. Research suggests that those with elite status are often the most effective users of Wasta, leveraging networks within state and business institutions (Hertog, 2010). This reinforces inequality, as access to Wasta is unevenly distributed across class and regional lines. Wasta can entrench hierarchies by converting social ties into exclusive channels of mobility. As such, Wasta is not just a response to dysfunction but reconfigures governance in ways that advantage the well-connected.

Wasta is best understood as a durable, relational institution. It is a mechanism through which individuals navigate complex state-society relations, especially where formal rules are inconsistently applied. Its persistence underscores the fragmented nature of state authority and invites scrutiny into how informal practices intersect with governance, economic inclusion, and public trust. Any rigorous analysis of political economy or development in the Middle East must take Wasta seriously, not as a cultural footnote, but as a constitutive element of governance.

## II. Literature Review: Competing Theoretical Explanations of Wasta

The literature on Wasta has grown increasingly diverse, with scholars offering different lenses to understand its function in Arab societies. Broadly, these perspectives fall into three main camps: culturalist, institutionalist, and sociological. While each offers something useful, none fully captures the economic and political complexity of Wasta as it operates today.

Culturalist accounts tend to focus on values, norms, and traditions. Writers like Cunningham and Sarayrah (1993) explain Wasta as a cultural carryover from tribal systems, rooted in honor, obligation, and community loyalty. They emphasize its social logic and emotional value, portraying Wasta as a moral obligation rather than mere corruption. However, this approach often romanticizes or essentializes Arab culture, glossing over how Wasta is shaped by material incentives and modern power structures.

Institutionalist scholars, on the other hand, frame Wasta as a workaround for weak formal institutions. North's (1990) work on informal institutions provides the backbone for this view: when legal systems are slow or unreliable, people turn to informal networks for efficiency and predictability. Al-Ramahi (2008) follows this logic, arguing that Wasta fills gaps in rule-of-law systems, especially in hiring and service delivery. In this framing, Wasta is not just cultural, but rather, rational. While this explanation helps make sense of Wasta's persistence, it underplays the political dynamics that sustain it.

A third approach is sociological. Scholars like Sharabi (1988) analyze Wasta through the lens of neo-patriarchy. Here, Wasta is not just about helping one's kin; it's part of a larger system of authority based on hierarchy, loyalty, and informal power. Adham (2022) builds on this by showing how Wasta operates in the corporate world, especially in Saudi Arabia, where formal hiring processes mask deeply entrenched informal loyalties. This perspective helps explain how Wasta can thrive even in professionalized or technocratic environments. More recent scholarship moves toward synthesis. Elsaher et al. (2023) develop a typology that breaks Wasta into three functional types: Mojamala (grace/favor), Hamola (reciprocal support), and Somah (reputation or

credibility). This typology bridges the cultural and institutionalist camps by showing that Wasta can serve different purposes depending on context. Their framework allows for a more granular analysis and aligns with empirical findings from Arab Barometer surveys and firm-level studies.

Other scholars focus on the developmental implications of Wasta. Barnett et al. (2013) warn that Wasta, while sometimes necessary, can erode trust in public institutions over time. It creates a dual-track system where those without connections face higher transaction costs, fewer opportunities, and more uncertainty. This not only entrenches inequality but also weakens state legitimacy. Taken together, these literatures provide a foundation for this thesis. Each captures part of the story, but only by combining them along with new data we begin to understand how Wasta interacts with economic development, trust, and governance across different Arab states. The next chapter builds on this by outlining the methodological approach, case selection, and quantitative model used to test these relationships.

**III. Theoretical Contribution: Wasta as a Dual-Faceted Mechanism**

This study draws on three overlapping frameworks; Institutional Theory, Rentier State Theory, and Sociological Theory to explain how Wasta operates as a political and economic force. Rather than treating Wasta as a cultural quirk, the goal is to situate it within broader systems of power, trust, and resource distribution.

Institutional theory helps explain Wasta's persistence in environments with inconsistent rule enforcement. As North (1990) notes, informal institutions emerge to fill institutional voids. When citizens lack faith in legal or bureaucratic systems, they turn to trusted networks. Wasta

becomes not just a shortcut but a necessary tool to reduce uncertainty and transaction costs. In states where laws are unpredictable or selectively enforced, trust shifts from formal institutions to personal relationships. Wasta provides a structure for navigating this uncertainty.

However, this also carries a cost. As Barnett et al. (2013) argue, Wasta creates a dual system: those with access to connections move smoothly, while those without are left behind. This deepens inequality, erodes public trust, and distorts incentives. People begin investing in relationships rather than productivity. In doing so, Wasta reshapes economic rationality, especially in the job market and public services.

Rentier State Theory adds another layer. In oil-rich states, massive external revenue allows regimes to provide public goods without taxation. This weakens the need for citizen oversight, since governments don't rely on citizens for revenue (Beblawi, 1987). In such settings, Wasta thrives not because people lack alternatives, but because informal access to state benefits becomes a core part of the political contract. Hertog (2010) and Schwarz (2008) show that in rentier economies like Saudi Arabia, personal networks function as extensions of state power. Wasta is embedded in the political economy, used to distribute state resources, reward loyalty, and manage dissent.

In contrast, states like Jordan, while still partially rentier, face more fiscal constraints. The government relies on foreign aid and domestic taxation, which creates pressure to professionalize and rationalize public administration. Yet Wasta still persists. This suggests it is not merely a feature of wealth but also a reflection of how state-society relations are structured.

Finally, sociological theories of neo-patriarchy help explain the endurance of Wasta in social norms. Sharabi (1988) describes Arab political structures as extensions of the patriarchal family,

where loyalty to the leader substitutes for institutional legitimacy. Wasta fits neatly into this system. It relies on loyalty, obligation, and face-saving, reinforcing social hierarchies rather than dismantling them. Adham (2022) finds that in Saudi workplaces, these logics continue even under formal HR systems. Meritocratic systems may exist on paper, but Wasta remains the unwritten rule.

Elsaher's tripartite model (2023) also offers a useful conceptual bridge. Mojamala (favor), Hamola (reciprocal protection), and Somah (reputation) reflect different functions of Wasta, depending on context. For example, in bureaucracies, Somah might dominate as reputation is key; in tribal networks, Hamola may guide behavior. This layered framework helps analyze how Wasta shifts roles across settings, sometimes reducing risk, sometimes increasing exclusion.

Together, these theories help ground the empirical work that follows. Wasta is not just a workaround, it is a logic of access that adapts to different political economies. The next chapter outlines the comparative and quantitative methods used to explore that logic in practice.

## IV. Transition to Empirical Analysis and Methodological Approac

Building on the theoretical frameworks outlined above, this section outlines three central hypotheses that guide the study's empirical design. Each is rooted in the mechanisms identified across institutional, rentier, and sociological lenses, and together they reflect the multi-dimensional impact of Wasta on economic development and governance.

Wasta correlates negatively with perceptions of fairness and meritocracy in employment. When individuals believe that personal connections are a key determinant of job opportunities, they are

more likely to feel that the system is unfair. This perception undermines both motivation and investment in human capital. In such environments, merit-based hiring becomes a secondary consideration, and Wasta becomes the expected route to success.

Wasta correlates negatively with trust in public institutions. When Wasta is used to bypass or manipulate public systems, it sends a signal that rules are negotiable and access is selective. Over time, this erodes public trust in state institutions, especially among those excluded from networks of influence. People may come to view the state not as a neutral provider of services, but as a venue for favors and patronage.

Rentier states exhibit higher levels of normalized Wasta, but lower levels of perceived unfairness. In rentier contexts, Wasta is not always seen as corrupt. Instead, it may be normalized as part of how the state functions, especially when wealth distribution is top-down and political participation is limited. In these settings, people may expect and even accept Wasta, especially if it delivers access to state benefits. Thus, the social stigma around Wasta may be lower than in more bureaucratic or democratic systems.

These hypotheses form the foundation of the next two chapters. Chapter 2 outlines the qualitative case study design and the construction of the regression model using Arab Barometer survey data. Chapter 3 evaluates these hypotheses against the data, identifying both regional trends and case-specific dynamics that reflect how embedded Wasta is and its consequences across the Middle East.

**Chapter 2: Jordan -Saudi Arabia Cases and Arab Barometer regression.**

This chapter outlines the mixed-methods approach employed in this study, combining qualitative comparative case studies with quantitative regression analysis using data from the Arab Barometer. The integration of these methods is designed to explore both the contextual nuances of Wasta's role in specific institutional settings and broader regional trends in public perceptions of Wasta and its impact on governance and economic development.

The qualitative component investigates how Wasta is practiced in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, using documented narratives to understand the relationship between rentier dynamics and informal governance. This comparative case study approach allows the study to explore how Wasta varies in form and effect between a semi-rentier state (Jordan) and a full rentier state (Saudi Arabia). The case studies are interpreted using Elsaher's typology of Mojamala, Hamola, and Somah to identify key differences in how Wasta shapes and is shaped by institutional environments. The quantitative component complements the qualitative analysis by using Arab Barometer data to identify correlations between Wasta-related behaviors and public perceptions of government effectiveness, institutional trust, and economic opportunity. This regression-based analysis includes data from multiple countries across the Middle East and North Africa, providing a regional perspective on how informal practices intersect with institutional development.

## I . Case Selection Rationale

Jordan and Saudi Arabia were deliberately selected to represent distinct points along a continuum of rentier state characteristics. Jordan, often characterized as a semi-rentier state, depends significantly on external financial aid and remittances, which impact its governance and institutional capacity. The country faces substantial bureaucratic inefficiencies, making it especially conducive to informal governance practices such as Wasta. Jordan thus provides a critical case for understanding how informal mechanisms emerge and evolve in response to both bureaucratic and economic constraints.

Saudi Arabia, in contrast, epitomizes a full rentier state, drawing substantial income from oil exports. This significant resource wealth facilitates extensive patronage networks and a distinct mode of governance characterized by deep-rooted tribal loyalties and reciprocal obligations. Its state structure embeds Wasta deeply within the political economy, reinforcing informal hierarchies alongside formal authority. By examining these contrasting cases, this research seeks to reveal how varying rentier dynamics shape the nature, usage, and implications of informal practices like Wasta, providing a robust comparative analysis.

## II. Qualitative Comparative Analysis

The qualitative methodology is centered around detailed comparative case studies that investigate specific narratives and documented instances of Wasta within Jordan and Saudi Arabia. This approach aims to explore how distinct institutional and economic contexts influence not only the forms that Wasta takes, but also its consequences for institutional performance and social outcomes.

In Jordan, the case study draws upon documented narratives from multiple sectors, particularly emphasizing the public sector, where Wasta significantly affects hiring decisions, service delivery, and administrative processes. To ensure comprehensive coverage, this analysis utilizes a variety of primary and secondary sources, including academic literature (Cunningham and Sarayrah 1993; Al-Ramahi 2008), governmental policy reports, investigative journalism, and documented personal accounts. These sources enable the identification of clear patterns in Wasta's utilization, highlighting adaptive responses to bureaucratic inefficiencies as well as illustrating how institutional performance is impacted. Through these narratives, the study explores detailed examples of how citizens leverage personal connections to navigate administrative challenges, secure employment opportunities, or obtain essential public services.

In Saudi Arabia, the qualitative analysis similarly relies on documented narratives but emphasizes both governmental institutions and corporate environments, areas where extensive patronage networks and entrenched tribal affiliations shape organizational behavior and decision-making. Primary sources for these case studies include comprehensive studies conducted by Adham (2022) and Albihany and Aljarodi (2024), which offer in-depth analysis of Saudi corporate governance structures and entrepreneurial environments, respectively. These studies provide rich insights into how deeply entrenched tribal affiliations and state-supported patronage networks structure access to employment, resource distribution, and policy decision-making. The analysis specifically investigates how Wasta frequently manifests through practices of enduring loyalty (Somah) and strong reciprocal obligations (Hamola), and examines the resultant effects on economic outcomes and institutional trust.

The qualitative case study analysis uses Elsaher's typology; Mojamala, Hamola, and Somah as a comprehensive analytical framework to systematically interpret and compare narratives from Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Mojamala, which encompasses polite social gestures and superficial courtesies, helps to explain the initial stages and surface-level interactions of informal networks. Hamola, reflecting reciprocal obligations, provides insights into the mutual exchange of favors and the maintenance of social and professional relationships over time. Somah, characterized by deep-seated trust and enduring loyalty, explores how long-standing familial and tribal bonds underpin practices of Wasta. These categories help explain the motivations behind Wasta and how it operates in different contexts. While they often overlap, recognizing their distinctions allows for a more detailed analysis. By utilizing these analytical categories, the study achieves a nuanced understanding of how different types of Wasta function and vary across Jordan's semi-rentier and Saudi Arabia's full rentier contexts.

Thematic analysis will be used to identify key patterns and logics across the narratives collected. The data are coded according to recurring themes such as meritocracy, access, loyalty, and public perception. These themes are then mapped onto Elsaher's typology to assess the prevalence and function of each Wasta dimension across the two cases.

## III. Jordan: Navigating Bureaucracy

In Jordan, Wasta is a widely accepted and deeply ingrained strategy for managing bureaucratic delays and inefficiencies. In many cases, it serves as a necessary response to an overburdened and underperforming public sector. A detailed account shared by Cunningham and Sarayrah

(1994) in Taming Wasta to Achieve Development traces the extended journey of a young man named Ahmad as he navigates the employment system using Wasta:

"Ahmad graduated from his village high school with average grades. [...] Two years lapsed, and still no job. Ahmad's father pleaded with all significant public officials of his extended family to help find Ahmad a job. [...] Ahmad was promoted to sub-section head, responsible for supervising the work of ten surveyors who worked in various sites in his province. His family was grateful to God, because Ahmad's suffering and long wait for a job had paid off. While many of his friends were still unemployed, Ahmad had a prestigious position." (Cunningham and Sarayrah 1994, 32–33)

Ahmad's journey reveals the long-term embeddedness of Wasta, not just for securing a job but for progressing within it. His career was shaped by successive rounds of Wasta: first for employment, then for transfer closer to home, and finally for promotion to a supervisory role. At each stage, loyalty and family advocacy trumped institutional procedure. Ahmad's story reflects Hamola and Somah, highlighting how family-based loyalty sustains a system in which performance is secondary to connection.

Eventually, Ahmad's behavior began to reflect the system that promoted him. He reportedly began coming in late, using the government vehicle for personal errands, and shielding employees from his tribe who barely showed up to work. His example captures the corrosive cycle of Wasta: once inside the system, beneficiaries often lack incentives to perform because job

security is rooted in connection rather than competence. This not only harms public service delivery but also undermines institutional legitimacy in the eyes of colleagues and citizens.

Contrast Ahmad's experience with another case cited in the same article, where a manager used Wasta to hire a family member, only to fire him later due to poor performance. The resulting backlash reveals the cultural expectation that Wasta implies not just access but ongoing protection. Failing to uphold this expectation, even for valid reasons, is interpreted as a betrayal of family loyalty, a reflection of how deeply Wasta is woven into kinship and organizational norms.

This outcome is not exceptional. According to Al-Ramahi (2008), Wasta in Jordan is often used not only to gain employment but to evade oversight, influence administrative decisions, and alter legal outcomes. Al-Ramhi writes that Wasta undermines the principles of justice and equality before the law, eroding public confidence in state institutions. In one documented example, an individual with no legal background was appointed to a senior administrative position at a ministry, bypassing multiple qualified candidates with his only distinguishing factor being his tribal affiliation. Such distortions are common in Jordan's semi-rentier system, where the state attempts to balance tribal appeasement with bureaucratic centralization. This dual role of the state makes Wasta a politically useful, if administratively corrosive, tool. It ensures loyalty from key constituencies, especially in rural and tribal areas, while undermining efforts at institutional reform.

A more detailed institutional counterpoint is offered through the case of Abu Wahhab, a senior administrator who actively resisted Wasta while working as the Personnel Director in the Ministry of Education. In one widely cited incident, he refused to transfer a cousin to a preferred post despite intense pressure from family members and local tribal leaders. Cunningham and Sarayrah describe the fallout:

"He was said to be sabotaging their interests because he should be using his position to extend favors to them. For months, his social invitations dwindled, and some relatives boycotted family events he attended. He bore the ostracism quietly but firmly, saying, 'My duty is to the ministry, not to the tribe.'" (Cunningham and Sarayrah 1994, 36)

This powerful example illustrates how resisting Wasta is not simply a bureaucratic stance but a social risk. Abu Wahhab's refusal challenged entrenched expectations that public office should serve as a conduit for communal gain. His marginalization demonstrates the depth of collective pressure to conform and how the refusal to engage in Wasta is interpreted not as integrity but as betrayal. His case offers a rare glimpse into the emotional toll faced by reform-minded bureaucrats who attempt to shift governance norms from loyalty to legality.

The consequences of such social pressure are far-reaching. Reformers like Abu Wahhab are rare, and when they do emerge, they are often isolated and eventually sidelined. His story reveals that the logic of Wasta is upheld not only by direct beneficiaries, but also by a broader social fabric that equates impartiality with disloyalty. In this sense, Wasta is not merely a practice, it is a deeply embedded norm supported by powerful communal expectations.

This makes the problem of Wasta particularly difficult to resolve through top-down reforms alone. Formal rules may be drafted to eliminate nepotism and favoritism, but informal pressure from kinship networks often undermines implementation. The example of Abu Wahhab illustrates how defying these pressures carries significant social and emotional costs, even for the most principled administrators. It is this structural resilience where informal expectations override formal policy that makes Wasta so enduring in the Jordanian context.

Taken together, these narratives from Cunningham and Sarayrah (1994) and analysis from Al-Ramahi (2008) present Wasta as a deeply institutionalized force in Jordan. While it may serve immediate social functions to help individuals find employment or navigate slow bureaucracies, it also undermines long-term institutional trust and economic efficiency. The practice reinforces class and tribal stratification, rewards mediocrity over merit, and discourages citizens from investing in a rules-based system. In this context, Wasta is not a workaround, it is a parallel system that both sustains and sabotages the state.

**IV. Saudi Arabia: Patronage and Elite Access**

In Saudi Arabia, Wasta functions as an entrenched mechanism for structuring access to state and private sector resources. Unlike Jordan, where Wasta is often a response to underdeveloped bureaucracies and institutional delays, Saudi Arabia's Wasta system is embedded in the very logic of governance. The country's rentier structure which is centered around massive oil revenues means that the state does not rely on taxation to maintain legitimacy, which in turn limits citizen oversight and reduces incentives for transparent or accountable governance

(Beblawi 1987). This creates an environment where Wasta thrives, not as a coping strategy, but as a socially accepted and even expected practice for navigating institutions.

Adham (2022) provides valuable insight into this environment through a detailed ethnographic study of a large Saudi organization. He finds that informal networks often outweigh formal procedures in influencing hiring, promotion, and internal decision-making. Employees across all levels of the organization acknowledged that success and advancement were highly dependent on personal connections rather than qualifications or merit. Promotions, access to leadership, and inclusion in influential projects were frequently mediated by Wasta. For those without access to tribal or familial networks, this reality translated into career stagnation and a sense of exclusion.

One of the key insights from Adham's research is that Wasta is not a one-time tool used only to gain access; rather, it is a continuous system that sustains upward mobility and institutional favor over time. Those with strong Wasta connections were regularly protected from scrutiny, given first choice of professional development opportunities, and were considered for leadership roles regardless of performance. This ongoing use of Wasta exemplifies both Hamola, where mutual obligations are expected to be maintained indefinitely, and Somah, where trust rooted in kinship or long-term personal alliances supersedes institutional protocol.

Managers in the study also admitted to feeling pressure to comply with Wasta expectations, even when they conflicted with official hiring or performance guidelines. One HR manager described how merit-based decision-making was perceived as disruptive, noting that refusal to accommodate Wasta-based requests often led to tension with senior leadership or influential

tribal intermediaries. These practices reflect the dynamics of neo-patriarchy, where authority is exercised through personal networks rather than bureaucratic hierarchies. In such environments, neutrality or adherence to formal rules may be interpreted as disloyalty, undermining efforts to introduce meritocratic reforms.

Wasta also significantly influences Saudi Arabia's entrepreneurial ecosystem. Albihany and Aljarodi (2024) surveyed 236 early-stage entrepreneurs and found that personal networks played a major role in business success. Their data showed that entrepreneurs who had access to Wasta networks were more likely to report high levels of autonomy, greater ease in obtaining permits, and enhanced ability to secure financing. These individuals were also more confident navigating state regulations and interfacing with bureaucracies. In contrast, entrepreneurs without influential connections reported persistent challenges in securing operating licenses, accessing investor capital, and receiving timely responses from regulatory authorities.

This disparity reinforces the conclusion that Wasta contributes to inequality in access to economic opportunity. The authors emphasize that success in Saudi Arabia's start-up landscape is frequently determined not by entrepreneurial ability or innovation, but by one's position within trusted social circles. These findings align with a form of institutionalized Somah, wherein personal loyalty and relational embeddedness define the contours of professional advancement. In other words, Wasta functions as a gatekeeper for upward mobility in both public and private sectors.

Adham (2022) also describes the organizational impact of this culture. He notes that when meritocratic practices were attempted such as standardized evaluations or transparent promotion policies they were frequently undermined by internal resistance. Employees feared retaliation for bypassing informal expectations, and managers were reluctant to challenge Wasta norms for fear of losing their own political capital. This self-reinforcing cycle not only discourages individual initiative but also entrenches a form of an  institutional cycle that hinders innovation and reform.

Furthermore, Wasta in Saudi Arabia is often rationalized as culturally appropriate or necessary for maintaining social cohesion. In interviews, managers explained that referrals or recommendations from tribal leaders were treated as obligations that carried moral and reputational weight. Ignoring these signals was not just professionally risky it was socially taboo. This normative dimension reinforces Wasta's legitimacy, making it more than a tool of access: it becomes a moral imperative in maintaining community bonds.

Taken together, the findings from Adham (2022) and Albihany and Aljarodi (2024) make clear that Wasta in Saudi Arabia is more than an informal practice, it is an institution in its own right. It regulates opportunity, shapes organizational behavior, and defines the boundaries of inclusion within the political and economic system. In contrast to Jordan, where Wasta is reactive and compensatory, Wasta in Saudi Arabia is proactive and constitutive. It does not simply respond to institutional failure, rather it structures institutional function.

These insights highlight the importance of contextualizing informal practices like Wasta within the broader political economy of the state. In Saudi Arabia's rentier framework, Wasta serves as

a stabilizing force for elite networks and a mechanism for social reproduction. While it may facilitate short-term problem-solving or maintain harmony within tribal or professional circles, it ultimately perpetuates systemic inequality and impedes efforts at reform. Understanding Wasta through this lens allows for a more precise analysis of how informal institutions evolve, adapt, and endure in contexts of state-sponsored wealth and limited democratic accountability.

## V. Applying the Wasta Typology: Mojamala, Hamola, and Somah

Building on the comparative case studies of Jordan and Saudi Arabia, Elsaher's Mojamala, Hamola, and Somah offers a valuable framework for interpreting how Wasta functions differently across institutional and cultural contexts. These three categories help illuminate not just the form that Wasta takes, but the moral logic behind its use is revealing how norms of obligation, loyalty, and social courtesy drive informal governance and economic behavior in distinct ways depending on the political economy of the state.

In Jordan, Hamola, or reciprocal obligation, is the most pervasive form. This is evident in the case of Ahmad, whose family members lobbied officials for employment and later for advancement opportunities. The expectation that favors are to be repaid within kinship networks defines the structure of Wasta in Jordan's public sector, where access to limited resources such as government jobs is highly competitive and symbolically tied to social status. Somah, or deep-seated loyalty, emerges in cases like Ahmad's later career, where he protected underperforming tribal affiliates, and in the backlash faced by Abu Wahhab, who was ostracized for refusing to prioritize tribal loyalty over institutional duty.

Mojamala, characterized by social politeness and symbolic gestures, is less institutionalized in Jordan but still present in lower-stakes interactions, such as expediting paperwork or facilitating minor requests. In these cases, Wasta acts as a lubricant to bureaucratic machinery enabling smoother access without completely undermining institutional integrity. However, once Hamola or Somah are activated in higher-stakes decisions, they often displace formal rules altogether.

In contrast, the Saudi case reveals a dominant presence of Somah as the primary operating logic. Loyalty to one's tribe, region, or powerful patron shapes not only access to employment but also one's long-term success and mobility within both public and private sectors. Adham (2022) and Albihany and Aljarodi (2024) both find that long-term affiliation and trust networks consistently override merit-based procedures. Hamola exists as well, particularly in the obligation to fulfill referrals and recommendations, which are treated as moral imperatives rather than optional favors.

Mojamala in Saudi Arabia takes on a more formalized character. It is not merely about politeness, but a coded language of obligation among elites. A referral, even casually delivered, is rarely symbolic and it often carries binding expectations. The professional environment adapts to this logic, making informal gestures of loyalty highly consequential for career advancement and institutional influence.

Ultimately, Elsaher's framework allows us to trace not just the presence of Wasta, but its evolution and variation across institutional contexts. In Jordan, Wasta compensates for weak bureaucracies and fragmented authority, while in Saudi Arabia, it reflects and sustains a rentier

logic of elite preservation. This lens makes clear that while the language of Wasta may be shared across Arab states, its function is contingent upon broader political, economic, and cultural structures.

Understanding how Mojamala, Hamola, and Somah map onto divergent governance environments allows this study to theorize Wasta not as a static cultural artifact, but as a flexible informal institution whose form and consequences are deeply shaped by the nature of the state. This insight will also guide the interpretation of quantitative findings in Chapter III, where patterns of trust, access, and institutional satisfaction are examined across the broader MENA region.

**VI. Quantitative Research Design and Regression Framework**

To complement the qualitative insights developed through the comparative case studies of Jordan and Saudi Arabia, this study will also use a quantitative research design to investigate how Wasta operates across a broader regional context. Using survey data from the Arab Barometer, the analysis explores how individual experiences and perceptions of Wasta relate to institutional trust, perceived fairness, and satisfaction with governance. This approach tests whether the patterns identified in the case studies generalize across the MENA region, while also examining whether Wasta's consequences vary depending on political and institutional settings.

The quantitative analysis uses data from the Arab Barometer Wave V (2018–2019), which includes responses from over 25,000 individuals across 12 Arab countries. These nationally representative surveys provide a robust dataset for examining public attitudes toward Wasta, trust

in institutions, and perceptions of state performance. Although Saudi Arabia is not included in this wave, the regional coverage allows for meaningful cross-national comparisons, particularly in countries that share structural or political similarities with Jordan.

**Variables and Model Design:**

While Elsaher's (2024) typology of Wasta: Mojamala, Hamola, and Somah was central to interpreting the qualitative case studies, elements of these categories also inform the quantitative framework. Although the Arab Barometer does not directly measure each dimension, specific survey items reflect underlying patterns. For example, Q213b (on the frequency of Wasta in employment) aligns with Hamola, reflecting systemic reciprocity and mutual obligation, particularly in public sector hiring. Q204b, which evaluates the government's ability to reduce corruption, and Q213a (on whether Wasta is considered corruption), indirectly speak to the normalization associated with Somah—deeply embedded loyalty networks that obscure formal accountability. Mojamala, characterized by symbolic courtesy and superficial favor-exchange, is more difficult to isolate in survey instruments and is not explicitly captured here. Still, these links help ground the analysis in a broader conceptual framework, and allow Elsaher's typology to guide the interpretation of survey responses across national contexts.

| Variable type | Variable name | Arab Barometer/Measurements |
|---|---|---|
| Dependent Variable | Institutional trust | Q201a: "How much trust do you have in [the government/courts/parliament/police.]? " * |
| Dependent Variable | Perceived fairness | Q213b: "Do you think obtaining employment through Wasta happens...?" |
| Dependent Variable | Government satisfaction | Q204 & Q204b: Q204: "I am going to ask a number of questions related to the current government's performance in specific areas. How would you evaluate the current government's performance on…"(Social factors) and Q204b: "how would you evaluate the current government's performance on… (economic factors)** |
| Independent Variable | Is wasta corrupt | Q213a2: "Do you consider government |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | officials providing Wasta to relatives a form of corruption?" |
| Control Variable | Rentier index (country-level) | Constructed from external data: oil rents as % of GDP and Net ODA as % of GNI (World Bank) |
| Control Variable | Age | Age - Q1001gcc |
| Control Variable | Gender | Gender (M or F )- Q1002 |

* The institutional trust variable is constructed as a composite index averaging responses to four sub-items of Q201a, which ask about trust in the government, courts and legal system, parliament, and the police.

** The variable ‘Government satisfaction’ will be constructed by averaging responses to Q204a (on job creation) and Q204b (on corruption reduction)

***ODA stands for Official Development Assistance. Theoretically another type of ‘rent’

The main model will be an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression for continuous dependent variables (e.g., trust levels measured on a scale) and logistic regression for binary outcomes (yes/no perceptions of corruption or fairness).

Given data limitations and the absence of countries like Saudi Arabia from the Arab Barometer dataset, this study adopts a reverse-inference strategy using negative hypothesis testing. Rather than attempting to measure the effects of Wasta in highly rentier or autocratic states where such

data may be suppressed or unreliable, this study instead examines countries that are less structurally dependent on Wasta. The premise is that if these lower-rentier states consistently score higher on measures such as institutional trust, perceived fairness, and government satisfaction, and concurrently report lower tolerance or perceived necessity of Wasta, then one can reasonably infer that Wasta is inversely correlated with long-term institutional and economic development.

Accordingly, the regression analysis is designed to test whether higher survey scores on governance and satisfaction indicators are negatively associated with the rentierism index. This logic builds on the principle that in rentier states, where governments are funded through external rents rather than citizen taxation, accountability mechanisms tend to be weaker. The absence of taxation reduces public leverage over state institutions, thereby normalizing informal practices like Wasta as a substitute for institutional reliability. If validated, this would strengthen the case that reliance on Wasta is symptomatic of institutional underdevelopment and that reducing Wasta dependency is conducive to long-run socio-economic progress.

Future research may consider whether certain states, such as Tunisia or Morocco, show early signs of weakening Wasta's hold through greater institutionalization, legal reforms, or shifts in public attitudes. However, currently, no MENA country can be confidently described as having moved into a fully post-Wasta society or system. Jordan, while still shaped by deeply embedded informal norms, serves as a valuable middle-ground case in this study, offering insights into the interaction between informal practices and semi-institutionalized governance structures. First, Jordan exhibits a semi-rentier structure; it lacks natural resource wealth but relies heavily on foreign aid and remittances, functioning as a partial rentier state without the fiscal independence afforded by oil

revenues. This hybrid economic model makes it a compelling case for studying how informal mechanisms like Wasta persist even in the absence of large-scale resource rents.

Second, Wasta in Jordan is not only widespread, especially in public sector hiring, but increasingly contested. Public discourse reflects growing frustration with informal favoritism, suggesting that while Wasta remains embedded, it is no longer uncontested. These social tensions point to a society negotiating between informal norms and formal aspirations. Third, Jordan features relatively well-developed formal institutions such as bureaucracies, courts, and civil service that exist alongside informal mechanisms. Reform-minded bureaucrats, such as Abu Wahhab, highlight internal friction within the system. These features make Jordan a valuable middle-ground case for exploring how informal systems persist in the presence of formal state structures and how their interaction varies across contexts.

**Hypotheses:**

H1: Individuals who consider Wasta to be a form of corruption are more likely to express distrust in formal institutions.

H2: Individuals who view Wasta as harmful are more likely to believe that government performance is inadequate and that access to services is unfair.

H3: The strength of the relationship between anti-Wasta attitudes and distrust/fairness perceptions varies by country, and is weaker in countries with stronger rentier characteristics, where informal practices are more normalized.

**Country Scope and Methodological Considerations:**

To capture structural economic differences across countries, a rentierism control variable is included at the country level. This variable is constructed using publicly available data from the World Bank's World Development Indicators and OECD reports. Specifically, this model constructs a composite rentierism index using two measures depending on each country's structural profile: (1) oil rents as a percentage of GDP and (2) fOfficial Development Aid as a percentage of GNI. These values are drawn from publicly available data provided by the World Bank and OECD for the year 2018 to match the Arab Barometer Wave V dataset. Each variable is standardized across countries, and the final rentierism index is computed as the average of the two standardized scores. This approach captures both traditional oil-based rentier states (e.g., Iraq, Libya, Algeria) and aid-dependent economies (e.g., Jordan, Lebanon), ensuring a more conceptually inclusive measure of external rent reliance.

Including both oil and aid rents allows the model to more accurately control macroeconomic structures that reduce taxation and weaken state accountability. In such contexts, informal governance mechanisms like Wasta tend to become more entrenched and normalized. By integrating both revenue forms, this rentier index better aligns with the study's theoretical framework, which identifies rent dependency, not just oil, as a key structural condition supporting the persistence of Wasta. This control enhances the explanatory power of the model by adjusting for macroeconomic context while maintaining the focus on individual-level perceptions and behavior.

While Saudi Arabia is not included in the dataset used for the quantitative analysis, its absence does not hinder the broader purpose of this component. Instead, the regression models establish

regional patterns in how Wasta correlates with governance perceptions. These patterns then serve as a point of comparison when analyzing whether Jordan fits within, or deviates from, the regional trends, and whether Saudi Arabia's more entrenched rentier logic suggests divergence due to deeply embedded rentier dynamics and limited institutional transparency.

**Chapter 3**

This chapter presents the quantitative results of the study, expanding on the theoretical and case study-based findings introduced in Chapters 1 and 2. Drawing on Arab Barometer Wave V data, this analysis tests three core hypotheses about how perceptions of Wasta relate to public attitudes about government performance, institutional trust, and fairness in the allocation of public resources. These hypotheses are grounded in the idea developed in Chapter 1 that Wasta functions as a dual-faceted informal institution. On one hand, Wasta helps individuals navigate inefficient formal structures; on the other, it can erode trust in state institutions and reinforce inequality. The case studies of Jordan and Saudi Arabia demonstrated how Wasta operates differently across political and economic contexts. This chapter shifts from qualitative insight to empirical testing to examine whether the patterns suggested by those case studies hold across a larger, cross-national dataset.

This chapter uses three regression models to test whether public perceptions of Wasta—as a form of corruption—are statistically associated with attitudes about governance. Model 1 tests Hypothesis 1, which proposes that individuals who view Wasta as corruption are more likely to distrust formal institutions. Model 2 tests Hypothesis 2, which expects that these same individuals

will also report lower satisfaction with the government's overall performance. Model 3 tests Hypothesis 3, predicting that respondents who consider Wasta to be corruption will be more likely to perceive unfairness in access to employment and services. In all models, the key independent variable is whether a respondent believes Wasta constitutes corruption. Each model includes controls for age, gender, and a country-level rentierism index to account for demographic and structural variation.

Before conducting the regression analysis in Stata, the raw survey data from the Arab Barometer Wave V were first cleaned and pre-processed in Excel to ensure consistency and completeness. Observations with missing or incomplete responses were excluded, and cells containing formula-based placeholders (such as those using IFERROR) were cleared to avoid import issues. Variables were then recoded to align with the analytical framework—categorical responses were converted to numerical values, and composite indices (such as institutional trust and government satisfaction) were created by averaging multiple ordinal-scale survey responses. Once the dataset was imported into Stata, additional validation steps were carried out to confirm variable types, ensure coding consistency, and identify any outliers. The final dataset was restricted to complete entries across all variables, yielding a usable sample of 23,680 observations.

**I . Model 1:  Institutional Trust and Perceptions of Wasta as Corruption**

The first model tests whether seeing Wasta as corruption is associated with lower trust in government institutions. The dependent variable is a composite index of trust in the government,

parliament, courts, and police.[1] The results from the ordinary least squares (OLS) regression strongly support Hypothesis 1.

As shown in Table 1, individuals who identify Wasta as a form of corruption report significantly lower levels of institutional trust ($\beta = -0.2138$, $p < 0.001$). This association holds even when accounting for age, gender, and rentierism. Age has a modest but statistically significant negative effect ($\beta = -0.0036$), while gender shows a stronger relationship—female respondents report much lower trust in institutions than male respondents ($\beta = -0.2792$). Rentierism also negatively predicts institutional trust ($\beta = -0.0476$), reinforcing the argument that citizens in rentier states are less likely to perceive formal institutions as legitimate or responsive.

These results align with the dual-faceted theory of Wasta introduced in Chapter 1. When Wasta is framed as a form of corruption, it signals a lack of rule-based governance and undermines trust in institutions. These findings echo the Jordanian case study, where Ahmad benefited from Wasta in securing government employment, while reform-minded figures like Abu Wahhab faced social backlash for rejecting it. The data confirm that Wasta does not merely act as a coping strategy but also erodes formal legitimacy and deepens distrust, particularly in states already weakened by rent-based governance.

[1] The institutional trust variable is constructed as a composite index averaging responses to four sub-items of Q201a, which ask about trust in the government, courts and legal system, parliament, and the police.

Table 1. OLS Regression Predicting Institutional Trust

| **Variable** | **Coefficient (β)** | **Std. Error** | **t-value** | **p-value** | **Significance (p < o.01?)** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Wasta is Corruption (1 = Yes) | –0.2138 | 0.0138 | –15.47 | 0 | Yes |
| Age | –0.0036 | 0.00034 | –10.57 | 0 | Yes |
| Gender (1 = Male, 2 = Female) | –0.2792 | 0.0078 | –35.83 | 0 | Yes |
| Rentierism Index | –0.0476 | 0.00798 | –5.97 | 0 | Yes |
| Constant | 3.4841 | 0.0237 | 146.89 | 0 | Yes |

N = 23,680$R^2$ = 0.069; Adjusted $R^2$ = 0.0691:

Taken together, the findings in Model 1 point to a broader logic of informal institutionalism. Wasta, when interpreted as corruption, significantly undermines public confidence in formal

governance. While this supports the theoretical claim that Wasta disrupts institutional trust, it also signals a larger institutional tension: citizens may rely on informal ties in response to inefficiencies, but doing so reproduces the very trust gaps that sustain those inefficiencies. Importantly, this model does not claim that all forms of Wasta erode trust, but that perceptions of its misuse, especially when seen as corrupt, trigger stronger public skepticism. When interpreted in light of the Jordan and Saudi case studies, the data show how the perceived legitimacy of informal access mechanisms varies depending on context. In Jordan, Wasta filled bureaucratic voids, while in Saudi Arabia, it functioned as a tool of elite reproduction. The regression model captures the effect of these perceptions, helping to validate the dual-faceted theoretical model of Wasta introduced in Chapter 1. Specifically, it reinforces the distinction between Wasta as a relational mechanism that provides access in contexts of institutional weakness (such as Ahmad's case in Jordan), and Wasta as a mode of elite entrenchment that erodes broader perceptions of legitimacy and fairness (as seen in the tribal structures of Saudi Arabia). The empirical results lend support to the idea that Wasta operates differently depending on whether it is seen as solving individual problems or perpetuating systemic inequality, a distinction central to the typology of Mojamala, Hamola, and Somah developed earlier in the study.

## II. Model 2: Government Satisfaction and Perceptions of Wasta as Corruption

Model 2 tests whether respondents who view Wasta as a form of corruption are more likely to express dissatisfaction with the performance of their government. The dependent variable is a composite index constructed from responses to two items: perceived government success in job creation and in reducing corruption. The independent variable remains the same as in Model 1, as do the controls for age, gender, and rentierism.

The results strongly support Hypothesis 2. As shown in Table 2, individuals who believe Wasta constitutes corruption are significantly more likely to rate government performance poorly ($\beta = -0.2068$, $p < 0.001$). This association remains significant even after controlling for age, gender, and structural conditions. Once again, both age and gender are significant predictors. Older individuals report slightly lower satisfaction with government performance ($\beta = -0.0022$, $p < 0.001$), while female respondents report lower satisfaction than males ($\beta = -0.2403$, $p < 0.001$). Notably, the coefficient for the rentierism index is larger in this model ($\beta = -0.1371$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that perceptions of poor government performance are especially pronounced in countries with higher levels of rent dependence.

Table 2. OLS Regression Predicting Government Satisfaction

| Variable | Coefficient (β) | Std. Error | t-value | p-value | Significance (p < 0.01?) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Wasta is Corruption (1 = Yes) | –0.2068 | 0.0117 | –17.67 | 0 | Yes |
| Age | –0.0022 | 0.00029 | –7.48 | 0 | Yes |
| Gender (1 = Male, 2 = Female) | –0.2403 | 0.0067 | –36.38 | 0 | Yes |
| Rentierism Index | –0.1371 | 0.0068 | –20.28 | 0 | Yes |
| Constant | 3.6404 | 0.0201 | 181.1 | 0 | Yes |

N = 23,680$R^2$ = 0.083; Adjusted $R^2$ = 0.0832

Model 2 reveals another dimension of Wasta's impact;how perceptions of corruption are not only linked to trust but also to concrete assessments of government performance. The negative coefficient on the rentierism index in this model, larger than in Model 1, points to the heightened vulnerability of rent-dependent states to critiques of service quality. This finding supports part of the theoretical framework, which links rentierism to weakened accountability. At the same time, this result invites nuance. While Wasta is correlated with dissatisfaction, it may not be the only cause. In contexts like Saudi Arabia, where formal accountability is often mediated by tribal

loyalty or patronage, dissatisfaction may manifest differently than in Jordan, where public frustration more directly targets inefficiency and unfairness.

Thus, Model 2 supports the idea that Wasta contributes to negative views of government effectiveness, but also leaves room for alternative, culturally specific interpretations of what ‘satisfaction’ means. In Jordan, dissatisfaction may arise from frustration with inefficient public services, limited job access, and unequal enforcement of rules—areas where Wasta operates as both a workaround and a barrier. In Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, where Wasta is more deeply embedded in tribal loyalty and patronage networks, 'satisfaction' may not hinge on universal standards of meritocracy, but rather on how well one's group is served. This distinction reinforces the theoretical claim that perceptions of governance are filtered through local social norms and institutional expectations. What one population may see as corruption, another may view as loyalty or social responsibility. Therefore, while the statistical results confirm a general association between anti-Wasta attitudes and dissatisfaction, they also highlight the need to interpret these findings through the lens of context-dependent political culture.

## III. Model 3: Perceived Fairness and Attitudes Toward Wasta

Model 3 tests the third hypothesis: that individuals who believe Wasta is a form of corruption are more likely to perceive unfairness in access to public jobs and services. The dependent variable, drawn from survey item Q213B, captures the respondent's view on how often Wasta is used in employment decisions. Higher values on this scale indicate more positive perceptions (i.e., less frequent Wasta), while lower values reflect perceptions of greater unfairness and favoritism.

The regression results provide strong support for Hypothesis 3. As Table 3 shows, respondents who see Wasta as corruption are significantly more likely to report unfairness in employment access ($\beta = -0.2000$, $p < 0.001$). This means that, holding other factors constant, these individuals perceive Wasta as more pervasive and damaging in the hiring process. Age has a small but significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.0012$, $p < 0.001$), and women are more likely than men to report frequent use of Wasta ($\beta = 0.0718$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting gendered perceptions of access. Finally, the rentierism index is also a strong positive predictor ($\beta = 0.1066$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that respondents in rentier-heavy states are more likely to accept or experience Wasta as a normalized part of employment.

Table 3. OLS Regression Predicting Perceived Fairness in Access

| Variable | Coefficient (β) | Std. Error | t-value | p-value | Significance (p < 0.01?) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Wasta is Corruption (1 = Yes) | –0.2000 | 0.0111 | –17.95 | 0 | Yes |
| Age | 0.0012 | 0.00027 | 4.26 | 0 | Yes |
| Gender (1 = Male, 2 = Female) | 0.0718 | 0.0063 | 11.43 | 0 | Yes |
| Rentierism Index | 0.1066 | 0.0064 | 16.57 | 0 | Yes |
| Constant | 1.0742 | 0.0191 | 56.16 | 0 | Yes |

N = 23,680, $R^2$ = 0.0304; Adjusted $R^2$ = 0.0302 Note: The column labeled "p < 0.01?" indicates whether the result is statistically significant at the 1% level

The third model helps capture how perceptions of procedural justice are shaped by informal norms. The negative relationship between Wasta-as-corruption and fairness suggests that Wasta does not just affect outcomes, it also shapes how fair or unfair people perceive those outcomes to be. What makes this model important is its alignment with both the Ahmad and Abu Wahhab case studies. Ahmad's story illustrates how access through Wasta may be normalized but still viewed as unfair by others, especially when competition is steep and opportunity scarce. Meanwhile, Abu Wahhab's rejection of Wasta was framed as socially disruptive, suggesting that even within fairness norms, loyalty can override merit. Additionally, the positive coefficient on the rentierism index in this model is noteworthy. It implies that in more rentier-reliant societies,

Wasta may be so embedded in the system that its presence no longer registers as ‘unfair’ even if it remains a barrier to meritocracy.

In sum, Model 3 adds a relational layer to the theoretical claim: perceptions of fairness are mediated not just by what people experience, but by how their communities define legitimacy and access. In this way, fairness becomes a culturally constructed concept, what counts as fair is shaped by whether individuals believe their social networks are functioning effectively for them or excluding them. The model illustrates that where Wasta is seen as necessary or justified, its presence may not trigger outrage, but rather affirmation of expected social roles. Conversely, where Wasta is perceived to violate ideals of meritocracy or universal access, it fuels resentment. These context-specific interpretations reinforce the importance of the Mojamala, Hamola, and Somah typologies, demonstrating that Wasta’s perceived legitimacy and thus its perceived fairness, depends on which logic is at play. By capturing these layered understandings, the model helps clarify why similar informal practices may generate very different political responses across settings.

**IV. Synthesis and Reflection**

Together, the three models offer a multidimensional picture of how Wasta—particularly when perceived as a form of corruption—shapes attitudes toward governance. Each model targets a different but complementary outcome: trust in institutions, satisfaction with government performance, and perceptions of fairness in access. In all three, the belief that Wasta constitutes corruption is consistently and significantly associated with negative perceptions across these domains. This consistency reinforces the study’s central theoretical argument: that Wasta is not

merely a cultural artifact or workaround, but a deeply embedded informal institution that interacts with formal structures to shape political and economic behavior.

Crucially, the results highlight the relational and context-dependent nature of Wasta. Whether Wasta is perceived as corrupt or acceptable depends not only on its outcomes, but on the social norms that govern its use. This aligns with the Mojamala, Hamola, and Somah typology developed in Chapter 1. When Wasta operates as a symbolic or polite gesture (Mojamala), it may be perceived as less harmful. But when it entails reciprocal obligation or entrenched loyalty (Hamola and Somah), its impact becomes structurally corrosive—especially in states with weak formal accountability mechanisms, like rentier regimes.

The variation observed across models also reinforces the importance of the Jordan-Saudi comparison. In Jordan, Wasta often appears as a tool of survival and navigation amid bureaucratic inefficiencies, whereas in Saudi Arabia, it is more closely tied to elite preservation and entrenched patronage. These patterns are mirrored in other rentier states such as Kuwait and Qatar, which share similar structural features: oil wealth, expansive public sectors, and limited formal accountability. In these contexts, Wasta may be normalized not merely as a coping mechanism, but as an expected component of how social capital is converted into opportunity, especially in securing government employment or resources. These differences help explain why perceptions of Wasta's legitimacy and its effect on trust, satisfaction, and fairness are uneven across contexts. The findings suggest that reform efforts aimed at curbing Wasta must consider not only institutional design, but also the social relationships and economic structures that sustain informal practices.

Figure 1 below visualizes the effect of perceiving Wasta as corruption across all three governance outcomes. The consistent, negative coefficients reinforce the statistical pattern discussed above and underscore the strength of this perception as a predictor of distrust, dissatisfaction, and perceived unfairness.

Figure 1

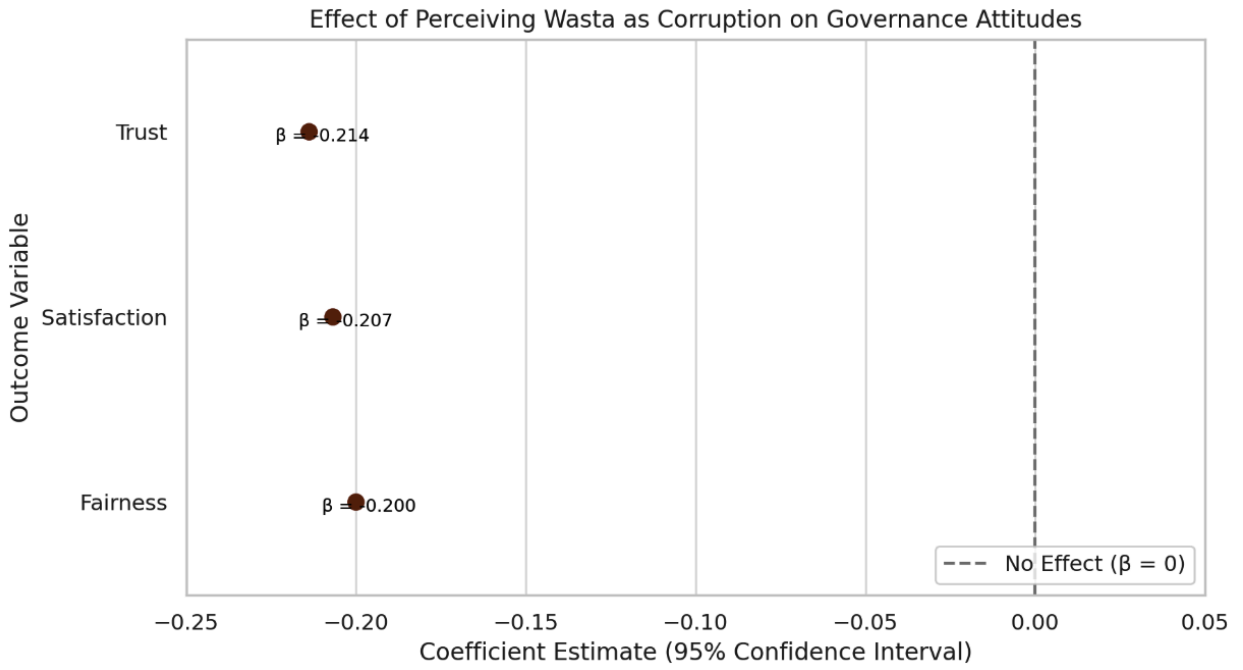



Figure 1 visually reinforces the quantitative findings by illustrating the effect of perceiving Wasta as corruption across all three governance outcomes: institutional trust, satisfaction with government performance, and perceived fairness in access. The plot presents coefficient estimates and 95% confidence intervals, with all three estimates falling clearly to the left of the zero line, indicating consistently negative and statistically significant relationships. The dashed

vertical line at zero represents the threshold of no effect; the fact that each confidence interval lies entirely on one side of this line confirms the robustness of the association. These visual results not only support the theoretical model, but also help clarify the strength and direction of Wasta's impact across multiple domains of governance perception. Importantly, the quantitative data do not merely confirm the theory—they refine it by revealing how perceptions of Wasta vary in intensity and meaning across contexts. Rather than a universal rejection, the consequences of Wasta appear shaped by structural conditions such as rentierism, as well as by gender and social norms. These findings demonstrate that while Wasta is a powerful predictor of how citizens relate to the state, its meaning is context-dependent and socially embedded. This reinforces the value of combining statistical analysis with contextual knowledge, and sets the stage for the concluding chapter to consider the broader implications of Wasta for governance and development in the Middle East. Chapter 4 will revisit the conceptual model developed at the outset, synthesize findings across qualitative and quantitative evidence, and reflect on what these results suggest about reform trajectories, social trust, and the role of informal institutions in shaping state-society relations. It will also consider the limits of this study and propose directions for future research into the political economy of informal practices in the MENA region.

## Chapter 4: Conclusions and Implications

Building on the theoretical and empirical findings of the previous chapters, this final chapter reflects on what these results suggest for understanding Wasta as an adaptive informal institution within the political economy of the Middle East. It revisits the theoretical model introduced in Chapter 1, reflects on insights from the comparative case studies in Chapter 2, and integrates the results from the quantitative analysis in Chapter 3. Ultimately, the chapter argues that Wasta should not be seen as a cultural remnant or a form of corruption alone, but as a dynamic social institution that adapts to the political and economic context in which it operates. As visualized in the coefficient plot in Chapter 3, the belief that Wasta constitutes corruption significantly predicts negative perceptions across all three governance domains. But the strength and interpretation of this effect depend on the underlying logic and relational meaning of Wasta, as captured by the Mojamala, Hamola, and Somah typology.

### I. Reframing Wasta: From Informal Practice to Institutional Logic

This study began with the idea that Wasta functions as a dual-faceted mechanism. On one hand, it helps individuals navigate dysfunctional institutions by providing access to jobs, services, or protection. On the other hand, it can reinforce inequality and erode trust in formal institutions when it becomes a substitute for merit-based processes. To better understand this tension, the study applied Elsaher's typology of Wasta; Mojamala (social courtesy), Hamola (reciprocal obligation), and Somah (deep loyalty). These categories were used to explore how Wasta operates across different contexts and levels of formality.

The case studies of Jordan and Saudi Arabia show how these dynamics play out in distinct ways. In Jordan, Wasta is primarily used as a tool to navigate slow or inconsistent bureaucracies. While it may help people in the short term, it often reinforces inequality and undermines institutional legitimacy. In contrast, in Saudi Arabia, Wasta is deeply woven into systems of tribal loyalty and elite access, operating as a structural feature of governance rather than a workaround. These differences highlight how the form and function of Wasta are shaped by broader state structures, political norms, and social expectations. Wasta's meaning and consequences, then, depend on the context in which it is embedded.

**II. What the Data Reveals: Perceptions, Patterns, and Pitfalls**

While the regressions show consistent relationships between Wasta and negative governance perceptions, interpreting these findings through the lens of the Mojamala, Hamola, and Somah typology adds an important layer of nuance. For instance, perceptions of unfairness, as captured in model 3 may stem most directly from Somah-style Wasta, in which access to opportunity is governed by deep, exclusive networks of loyalty. Conversely, dissatisfaction with government performance, as shown in Model 2, may reflect frustrations with Hamola-style reciprocal expectations that make public services appear conditional rather than universal. Trust in institutions, captured in Model 1, may be eroded by the normalization of all three types, particularly when citizens feel the formal system cannot be navigated without invoking personal ties, no matter how superficial (as in Mojamala).

This highlights how the perception of Wasta's harm is not solely about its presence, but about the logic behind its use. The typology helps interpret why similar behaviors may produce different

reactions depending on cultural and institutional context. These distinctions should inform future survey design by helping researchers go beyond binary understandings of informal practice. More granular, typology-driven data would allow scholars to better distinguish between relational trust, social obligation, and corruption.

At the same time, it's important to recognize the limits of the data. The regressions rely on subjective perceptions of Wasta rather than direct observation. While this may appear to weaken causal claims, these perceptions are politically meaningful in their own right. When people believe that favoritism drives access to opportunity, it shapes their attitudes toward the legitimacy of the state, even if they do not directly encounter Wasta themselves. The strength of the findings lies in this relational dynamic: perceptions of corruption are often as corrosive to governance as actual instances of wrongdoing. For scholars and policymakers alike, this underlines the value of perception-based metrics in studying institutional trust and legitimacy in the Middle East.

The regression models provided quantitative support for the theoretical argument. Respondents who identified Wasta as a form of corruption were significantly more likely to express lower trust in institutions, lower satisfaction with government performance, and a stronger belief that access to public services is unfair. These results held even when accounting for respondents' age, gender, and their country's level of rentierism. The consistent direction and significance of the results across all three models strengthen the conclusion that Wasta, when perceived as corrupt, negatively influences public trust and perceptions of fairness.

Notably, the rentierism index was also a significant factor in all models. Citizens in countries more reliant on oil revenues or foreign aid, rather than taxation, tended to report lower levels of trust and satisfaction. This supports the argument that rentier economies are more likely to normalize informal institutions like Wasta, which can thrive in environments where formal accountability is weak. The quantitative findings reinforce the idea that Wasta is not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon. Its impact varies not only by country, but also by how people interpret and experience it. Mojamala, Hamola, and Somah may manifest differently across contexts, and future quantitative work should aim to measure these distinctions more directly.

**III. Reform, Resistance, and Research Horizons**

The findings suggest that meaningful reform of Wasta cannot rely on anti-corruption laws alone. Instead, reforms must aim to build institutions that are accessible, predictable, and trusted by citizens. If people believe that rules are fairly applied and services are reliably delivered, they will have fewer incentives to rely on Wasta. However, reform is difficult because Wasta is not only functional but also carries social meaning. In many communities, helping someone through Wasta is a moral obligation tied to family, tribe, or reputation. As such, reforms must take into account the cultural dimensions of informal exchange, not just the institutional ones.

This study also points to important areas for future research. First, while the Mojamala, Hamola, and Somah typology provides a useful conceptual framework, it is difficult to operationalize in large-scale surveys. Future studies could explore how to measure these forms of Wasta more precisely, perhaps through mixed-methods approaches that combine surveys with interviews or ethnographic data. Second, the Arab Barometer dataset does not include Saudi Arabia in Wave V,

which limits the ability to draw direct statistical comparisons with one of the key case studies. Future work should aim to include a broader set of countries with more granular data. Third, Wasta's effects on outcomes beyond governance, such as youth employment, social mobility, or emigration decisions, remain underexplored.

In sum, this research contributes to a growing body of work that sees informal institutions not as relics of the past, but as adaptive systems that reflect and shape how power is exercised in the modern Middle East. Wasta is not just a workaround or a nuisance; it is a central feature of how many people engage with the state. Understanding this logic requires not only institutional reform but a broader reconceptualization of how informality, power, and legitimacy interact in shaping the political economy of the region.

**Normative Reflections: Should Wasta Be Eliminated?**

A central question that emerges from this study is not just how Wasta functions, but whether it should be eliminated altogether. The answer is not straightforward. While the data suggest that Wasta, specifically when perceived as corruption, erodes trust, fairness, and satisfaction, the study also demonstrates that Wasta plays an adaptive role in navigating broken or inaccessible systems. In contexts where formal institutions are weak, inconsistent, or exclusionary, Wasta can be the only viable pathway to opportunity or protection. For those embedded in strong social networks, it may function as a form of efficiency; for those excluded from those networks, it becomes a symbol of inequality and injustice.

This positional duality suggests that efforts to eliminate Wasta outright may be both unrealistic and counterproductive, especially if they fail to address the systemic conditions that make Wasta necessary in the first place. Instead, reform should focus on creating institutions that reduce the need for Wasta by ensuring transparent hiring, timely service delivery, and equitable access. Wasta should not be romanticized, but neither should it be reduced to mere corruption. Its persistence reflects institutional deficits and social expectations that cannot be undone by decree alone. As such, the goal may not be to eradicate Wasta completely, but to reconfigure the incentive structures and social contracts that currently make it a rational, even expected, part of public life. In a region where institutional gaps often define the citizen-state relationship, Wasta endures not because it is inherently good or bad, but because it is functional. Understanding Wasta is not just about diagnosing a problem; it is about recognizing the informal logics that continue to structure power, trust, and opportunity in the modern Middle East.

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