Wasta and Democratic Attitudes in the Middle East

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Abstract

The Middle East faces ongoing challenges in democratization and in corruption. This article examines the influence of *wasta* – a Middle Eastern form of clientelism – on citizens' political attitudes. Although *wasta* is situated between citizen services and corruption, many citizens view *wasta* as corrupt. Using Arab Barometer survey data, this article shows that the widespread use of *wasta* in the Middle East makes citizens less satisfied with their current largely non-democratic governments. *Wasta* also increases their interest in democracy as an egalitarian alternative regime structure. *Wasta* users, however, are protective of the personal advantages that *wasta* networks afford them. Widespread *wasta* thus represents a challenge to democratization.

Keywords

Corruption is pervasive in the Middle East. In 2021, the region scored 39.84 out of 100 on the Worldwide Governance Indicators Control of Corruption Index. Per Transparency International, "the Middle East and North Africa region is struggling to achieve tangible results in the fight against corruption. Systemic political misconduct and private interests overtaking the common good have allowed the region – already devastated by various conflicts – to be ravaged by corruption and human rights abuses during the COVID-19 pandemic" (2022, 13). MENA scored 39 on their scale (0=highly corrupt, 100=very clean). The use of

patronage, bribes, and relationships colors the region's political and economic development.

This article examines the confluence of citizens' experiences with a Middle Eastern form of clientelism – *wasta* – and their attitudes towards democracy. *Wasta* is reaching a goal or acquiring services through connections. Scholars have positioned *wasta* in a cultural middle space between citizen services and corruption based on the obtained objective (Benstead 2016; Kaya and Kopstheyn 2020). This connection to both service provision and corruption offers dueling predictions for its relationship to democracy. Corruption is arguably anti-democratic (Jackson et al. 2020). Alternatively, the increased state functionality provided by *wasta* could make citizens more democratic (Benstead et al. 2020).

To examine the impact of *wasta* on democratic attitudes, this study draws on five waves of the Arab Barometer (2007–2018). It examines the effect of *wasta* usage on perceived corruption and democracy in the state. It also looks at citizen interest in democracy. It finds *wasta* is substantially linked to corruption (*fasad*) in the publics' evaluations. Those who see *wasta* in use around them are less likely to view their states as democracies, but they are more likely to support democracy for their countries.[1] Among those who see their countries as democracies, *wasta* makes them less satisfied with their governments. Among those who recognize that they live in non-democracies, prevalent *wasta* makes them more interested in a democratic system. Theoretically, democratization equalizes political rights and access to state services and reduces the role of connections in accessing work or resources. *Wasta* users, on the other hand, are less interested in a regime change. *Wasta* is thus intimately linked with popular democratic attitudes.

Wasta, Corruption, and Politics

All governments must strike a balance in service provision between "the protection of particular interests and the promotion of the general interest" (Piattoni 2001, 3). Piattoni identifies this struggle particularly with democracy, but non-democratic governments also play this game of maintaining social stability and keeping their positions. In the Middle East, one way in which this tradeoff manifests is *wasta*.

Wasta is the achievement of a goal or acquisition of a service or product by means of an intermediary and his relationships. *Wasta* is inherently informal.

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[1] Despite the objective non-democracy classifications of these states, citizens may assert that their countries are "democracies."

It can range from conflict resolution, to employment, and even to access to medical treatments (Benstead 2016; Kubbe and Varraich 2020). This middleman – the *waseet* – is often an important community figure, such as a tribal chief or an elected official. His importance can be both cause and consequence of his connections. While *wasta* is a means to access state services, the use of relationships for access can be considered corrupt.

The conceptual overlap occurs when corruption is construed as "the absence of impartiality in the exercise of public power" (Kubbe and Varraich 2020, 3). The term is often associated with the illegal exchange of goods and services between public officials and private actors for their own enrichment, specifically at the expense of the public interest (Benstead et al. 2020). The Arabic word *fasad* is used broadly for corruption. As stated by Kubbe and Varraich, "[c]lientelism, patrimonialism, particularism, and patronage" are "sister concepts" to corruption (Kubbe and Varraich 2020, 3).[2] These terms for particularized attribution of services or benefits are not immune from the suspicion of corruption, although they may be classed separately. *Wasta* could be considered relational clientelism (Pellicer et al. 2020). Thus, *wasta* can facilitate legitimate interactions (e.g., constituent services) and corruption (e.g., unearned jobs).

Wasta usage is common in the Middle East. Arab Barometer V (2018) asked how often *wasta* is used in society: "Some people say that nowadays it is impossible to get a job without connections (*wasta*) while others say that jobs are only available to qualified candidates. Based on a recent experience (or experiences) you are personally aware of, do you think that obtaining employment through *wasta* happens" sometimes, often, or never. Of those who responded, 59.7% said it is used often. Only 6.9% said it is never used.

Notably, this outstrips the rates of *wasta* usage in Arab Barometer I (2007). That survey asked citizens if they had used *wasta* themselves in the last five years for a personal, familial, or neighborhood problem. Only 26.6% stated that they had, compared to 69.8% who said they had not.[3] The most common *waseet* (connection) were government officials, followed by governorate officials or community leaders, and traditional leaders (head of tribe, etc.). Religious leaders and civil society groups also fill this role.

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2 Though these systems are often associated with developing states (*wasta* is compared to *guanxi* in China or *blat* in Russia), advanced democracies like the US are not immune to relationship-based politics (e.g., nepotism, lobbying).

3 People may be overestimating *wasta*'s prevalence. Some users may also be using it often, making it widespread without being universally employed. The respondents may also have a low threshold for saying 'often.' Propensity-to-perception patterns should be evaluated in future research.

Wasta induces benefits and detriments for governance and society and, as such, is blamed for inequality and underdevelopment (Cunningham and Sarayrah 1994). For instance, hiring is suboptimal and governments are not held properly accountable because decisions are made based on *wasta*. At the same time, some see *wasta* as indispensable. *Wasta* is not necessarily illegal (though it could be used for illegal things) and can seem "normal and functional" (Jackson et al. 2020, 175). It compensates for "dysfunctional institutions" (ibid). For instance, *wasta* can be invoked *against* judicial or bureaucratic corruption (Benstead 2016). Although corruption is often presumed to increase transaction costs and economic inefficiency, it is "grease" in the gears of bureaucracy in "many developing countries" – including some that are considered democracies (Seligson 2002, 411). At its best, *wasta* generates networks of great trust and reduces transaction costs (Kubbe and Varraich 2020). While there is no explicit exchange, members of *wasta* networks are expected to help each other. *Wasta* thus strengthens familial, tribal, and friendship networks (Jackson et al. 2020; Cunningham and Sarayrah 1994).

Wasta can be divided into 'good *wasta*' and 'bad *wasta*.' Good *wasta* is about cutting red tape and getting people benefits to which they are legally entitled through string-pulling. For instance, in a functional system, it should not take a favor from the mayor or tribal chief to get a license renewed or a dorm room assigned. In the United States, handling such requests is considered "citizen services" by elected representatives, and representatives are *expected* to provide services like communicating with government agencies. Benstead et al.'s (2020) theory thus focuses on good *wasta*. Unequal provision of these services would be considered corrupt, undemocratic, or wrong in most developed states because of the inequality, not the act itself. Bad *wasta* provides an individual with something to which he is not entitled. The "inappropriate *wasta* usage" "deprives others of their rightful benefits, resources or employment"; it could be considered corrupt if it "overcomes merit" (Jackson et al. 2020, 175–176). This *wasta* is bad on its face, so it would be bad even if it were applied liberally.[4] Because of this varied usage, *wasta* may not *always* be considered corrupt by the public, even if researchers consider it corrupting.

Even when *wasta* is used to acquire goods or services that could be considered legitimate, the system can incorporate practices that are considered

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4 The distinction between good and bad is not about thinking one's own use is good but others' use is bad. It is about whether what the *wasta* achieves is something that is supposed to have occurred (e.g., passport renewal) but that required a middleman in this case. It would be bad *wasta* to obtain a job one is not qualified to perform, even if one is pleased to have the job and the necessary *waseet*. A grey area exists for cases like hiring a qualified candidate due to *wasta*. Future research could explore the boundaries of good/bad *wasta*.

corrupt in other societies. For instance, when the *waseet* is an elected official, there is a strong expectation that this action on his part is reciprocated later with a vote in his favor (Benstead 2016). This belief in reciprocity pervades despite the fact that rendering that service may be part of his job. Additionally, this reciprocity makes it hard for voters to vote for superior candidates or to base their vote on the candidate's overall platform if they are voting for connections. Voters' interest in punishing corruption in young democracies has previously yielded inconsistent results based on the extent and form of the corruption (Botero et al. 2019). Kaya and Kopstheyn (2020, 34) argue that the "omnipresence of *wasta* in the MENA region" leads to a social tolerance of corruption more generally. If not always corrupt, it may be corrupting. Bad *wasta* contributes to unequal distribution of benefits: "For ordinary citizens, who lack the connections of elites to top officials and power holders and have limited material resources, the prevalence of *wasta* in their social and economic systems is exhausting and frustrating at best, and often means restricted possibilities for social advancement and overall improved well-being" (Kubbe and Varraich 2020, 10). Systemic problems exposed by good *wasta* would be magnified by bad *wasta*.

Wasta and Public Opinion

Limited public opinion work has broached *wasta*. It is evident, though, that citizens are aware of *wasta* and corruption in the region, either because they have engaged in it or because they have observed it. There is strong reason to think that these forces impact their political experiences and regime-type preferences.

For instance, researchers have probed the *wasta*-corruption linkage. In Arab Barometer V, respondents indicated that some usages are corrupt. They were asked whether a "government official providing *wasta* for relatives" was corruption (*fasad*). Of those who answered the question, 83% said that it was. This could reflect the fact that the *wasta* was going to a relative – nepotism – rather than to a constituent, which would be closer to citizen services and thus more acceptable. Voters punish self-enrichment more harshly than clientelism, so the nepotism is not irrelevant (Botero et al. 2019). However, some of the sense of corruption likely reflects the use of *wasta* in and of itself. For comparison, 87.8% stated that "Making a small side payment to speed up a government service" was corruption. These rates are significantly but imperfectly correlated (r=0.30, p<0.001). Thus, there is some conceptual overlap between *wasta* and corruption. The extent of that overlap, in any given case, is an area

in need of further research.[5] Widespread usage has not entirely removed the taint of corruption.

That some people consider *wasta* corruption and others do not complicates the situation: "One of the biggest challenges for the anti-corruption regime in the MENA region can be found in the persistence of forms of corruption that are rarely recognized as such because they are assessed against a culturally relativistic benchmark" (Kaya and Kopshteyn 2020, 23). In some ways *wasta* is seen as corruption. However, international observers may view it as more corrupt than MENA-state residents do. When citizens protest corruption, they are more likely to be thinking of side payments, extortion, or embezzling than *wasta* networks used to access obstructed services (Jackson et al. 2020; Khalaily and Navot 2020). Some citizens can oppose *fasad* and see *fasad* as undemocratic without opposing *wasta*. This interrelationship is part of the reason why it is necessary to examine the relationship of *wasta* experiences and democratic attitudes.

Wasta usage in government, including accessing services and employment, overtly links *wasta* evaluations and regime attitudes. The government, as a sizeable employer and source of benefits, is greatly implicated in *wasta*. When asked in 2007 about the relative influence of *wasta* or qualifications on obtaining a government job, 29.4% of respondents said they thought *wasta* was more important than applicants' qualifications. Another 14.9% said they were equally influential. In this case, it is particularly likely to be bad *wasta*. Afterall, the applicants are getting something to which they were not entitled. Bad *wasta* here could be particularly deleterious to the public morale, since the government is corrupt and corruption reduces the institutions' utility. Witnessing corruption and clientelism makes citizens view their governments as less legitimate, and citizens in corrupted polities have good reason to distrust their institutions (Seligson 2002; Wang 2020).

Based on this in-between position of *wasta* with respect to corruption and citizen services, several predictions can be made about *wasta* and political attitudes.[6] *Wasta* can influence how citizens' evaluate their government's performance both with respect to corruption and generally. These include their

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5 Jones (2022) finds that the overall prevalence of corruption in the country does not drive Lebanese people to see *wasta* as *fasad*; however, the prevalence of *wasta* encourages them to see *wasta* as corrupt.

6 These predictions assumed that the respondents are reasonable (not perfectly rational) actors with imperfect knowledge (Lupia and McCubbins 1998) whose political preferences reflect their "personality traits, values, principles, group affiliations, and material interests" (Leeper and Slothus 2014, 131). They update their preferences based on their "core cultural

attitudes towards the idea of democracy and its appropriateness for their country.

In order to understand these opinions, an important element of MENA surveys must be acknowledged. Arabic-language surveys often use the word *dimuqratiyya* where English-language surveys say democracy. Although political scientists typically center electoral institutions in defining democracy (e.g., Przeworki et al. 1996), more expansive definitions are sometimes used (Munck and Verkuilen 2002). The former are considered minimalist definitions while the latter are maximalist. *Dimuqratiyya* can be construed very broadly, including centering economic equality (Ridge 2023). Respondents link it to elections, political rights, access to economic necessities, and job provision. Avoiding "financial and administrative corruption" is a commonly indicated feature of *dimuqratiyya*. That would be a maximalist interpretation. As the Arab Barometer uses the word *dimuqratiyya,* for the purposes of this analysis it should be understood that a very general egalitarian framework is indicated in answering these "democracy" questions, not a minimalist definition of democracy.

Building on these discussions, several relationships are possible. Firstly, given the connection between *wasta* and corruption, citizens who perceive frequent uses of *wasta* in employment markets should identify greater levels of corruption in their society (H1a). They could also perceive the government as less capable of addressing corruption, since the corruption is persisting (H1b). Secondly, as noted, the public conception of "democracy" tacitly includes averting corruption, so the presence of *wasta* should influence their perception of the level of democracy in their country. In Africa, government corruption has been negatively linked to perceived democracy (Mattes and Bratton 2007); the same has been shown in Arab states (Ridge 2023). Those who see a higher use of *wasta* should perceive less "democracy," given that the expansive meaning attributed to *dimuqratiyya* includes a lack of corruption (H2).

Dueling expectations are presented in the literature for the effect of *wasta* on evaluated government performance depending on the experience with *wasta*. Given the focus on democracy – which should not have corruption even though some democracies do – conditional effects are considered here. Among those who view their countries as democracies, prevalent *wasta* indicates that the government is doing badly (H3a). If things were working well,

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values and enduring social needs" through intuition and deliberate reasoning (Fatas-Villafranca et al. 2011, 419), which is informed by both accuracy and directional motivations (Leeper and Slothus 2014). Thus, objective facts, circumstances, and self-interest color their responses.

wasta would not be necessary. Corruption is also generally experienced negatively. Substituting clientelism for effective programming results in services being offered in a narrower and less efficient fashion (Wang 2020) and makes governments seem less legitimate or trustworthy (Seligson 2002). Thus, the citizens could reasonably conclude that the government is not performing as well. However, to the extent that, with *wasta*, the citizen gets what he needs (from a government official or someone else), *wasta* could actually increase evaluations of the government's performance (H3b). This is Benstead et al.'s (2020) position.

Wasta should also influence preferences over democracy. Almost by definition, democratization would reduce or remove corruption; it could also remove *wasta*. In terms of a direct effect, those who see *wasta* as widespread should be more likely to desire democracy (H4a). Clientelism's particularized distribution is contrary to democratic notions of equality (Wang 2020); the same could be said of *wasta*'s emphasis on relationships and sub-groups. Citizens could see democracy as a way to level the playing field by instituting equality of rights or by removing the corruption.

Using *wasta* may be different from observing it. The users would not benefit from removing the corruption or leveling the playing field; approval would indicate a strong philosophical commitment to democracy by supporting it at their own expense.[7] This is counter to Benstead et al.'s (2020) reasoning.[8] If, "while citizens do care about what they get from political leaders, they are more concerned with the process by which leaders make those decisions in the first place," delivered services may not compensate for needing *wasta* for the delivery (Jones 2022, 8). Thus, they could oppose democratization for their country on this principle, rather than out of love or respect for the ruling authority (H4b).

Among those who view their countries as democracies, perceiving *wasta* should make them less likely to think democracy is appropriate for their country or a good form of government (H5a). The democracy has not rooted out the corruption, and people still feel a need to resort to it. Thus, it may be a poor idea or a poor fit. In a non-democracy, those who see *wasta* as widespread may be less interested in democracy because they see an alternative channel

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7 Elites in these *wasta* networks also have an incentive to avoid leveling the playing field, because *wasta* keeps them relevant (Benstead 2018). A highly effective *waseet* could be expected to be anti-democratic. This must be left to future research.

8 They argue that "Corruption is experienced negatively by citizens while clientelism is often perceived as a form of system performance" (Benstead et al. 2020, 78). Looking at Waves 1 and 4, they find that using *wasta* personally and observing *wasta* usage by others is "unrelated to support for democracy."

to access services (H5b). Alternatively, they may favor democracy if they think that regime change (toward democracy) would address either the corruption or the need for it (H5c). As Benstead et al. (2020, 78) note, "Supplying the benefits of democracy to authoritarian and transitional societies may be critical to their advancement and fuel [citizens'] interest in democracy; otherwise, democracy can easily be seen as tyranny by the majority." Although the corruption/clientelism of *wasta* could scratch a temporary itch, the underlying desire to achieve these ends without resorting to *wasta* would favor democracy.

Materials and Methods

To evaluate these relationships, five waves of the Arab Barometer are utilized. These surveys cover a wide variety of MENA countries from 2006 to 2019. The Arab Spring is included in these waves – Wave 2 occurred in 2011. Almost all of the countries were classified as Not Free or Partly Free by Freedom House. Tunisia was the exception until the coup in 2021 (Ridge 2022a).

The social prevalence of *wasta* in obtaining employment was assessed in Waves 2–5 (discussed above). The usage was rated as never/sometimes/often in Wave 5. In Waves 2–4, the response options were "obtaining employment through connections is extremely widespread," "employment is sometimes obtained through connections, "employment is mostly obtained without connections," and "I do not know of any relevant experiences." In the first wave, respondents reported whether or not they themselves used *wasta* in the previous five years for personal, familial, or neighborhood problem resolution. These responses form the independent variables of interest.

The use of a question about employment is imperfect, since it cannot tap all uses of *wasta* nor does it ask only about governmental *wasta*. However, most *wasta* intermediaries are government officials. Furthermore, government employment is common in the Middle East, and officials are asked to help secure employment or jobs-producing laws for their constituents, even outside of government (Benstead 2016; Hong 2019; Kubbe and Varraich 2020). Additionally, the question appears in a section of questions about government institutions and, in the latest wave, near other questions about government corruption. It is feasible, then, that the respondents link it to *wasta* including by state agents, rather than just private-sector *wasta*. The Wave 4 question was used by Benstead et al. (2020) to study *wasta*'s political implications.

The prevalence of corruption is a binary indicator for whether "there is corruption within the national state agencies and institutions in your country" to a large/medium extent or to a small extent/not at all. Those who identified

corruption were also asked about the government's response.[9] A binary indicator on the same scale indicates "to what extent is the national government working to crackdown on corruption." As these are binary variables, logistic regression models are used.

How democratic they perceive their country to be is rated from "no democracy whatsoever" (0) to "democratic to the greatest extent possible" (10).[10] Government performance is the "extent of [their] satisfaction with the current government's performance" from completely unsatisfied (0) to completely satisfied (10). OLS models are used in these models.

To score attitudes towards democracy, two variables are used. One indicates whether democracy is appropriate for the country. It is the extent to which democracy is suitable to that country from completely unsuitable (0) to completely suitable (10). OLS models are used with this dependent variable. A binary variable was also created based on agreement with "Democratic systems may have problems, yet they are better than other systems." One indicates (strongly) agree, while zero indicates (strongly) disagree. Logit models are used with this variable.

Covariates are introduced additively. A binary variable indicates believing the national economy is doing well and whether the country has completely free and fair elections/free and fair with minor problems, as opposed to major problems or not free and fair. A binary indicator identifies those who believe most people can be trusted, males, the college educated, and members of civil society organizations. Age is measured in years.[11] A factor variable incorporates religiosity as not religious, somewhat religious, and very religious. These variables are used in prior research, such as Benstead et al. (2020). For instance, Jamal (2007) posits that civil society membership can foment trust and democratic interest by embedding citizens in trust-building environments and beneficial networks. Country-fixed effects and survey weights are included.[12] Thus, the analyses are focused on the individual-level opinion within these countries, holding unobserved country-elements fixed. Due to space constraints, the particularities of individual country-contexts cannot be separately analyzed here; the effects of variations in sectarianism, economy structure, or ethnic diversity could be examined in future research.

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9   In some waves, this question was asked to those who saw no corruption, while in others it was not.

10   In Wave 1, the scale is one to ten.

11   In Wave 1, age is measured in brackets numbered one to seven by the Arab Barometer.

12   The Wave I dataset does not include survey weights.

Results

The results are necessarily spread across several tables. In each case, the model number reflects the Arab Barometer wave. Recall that Wave 1 asked about personal use, rather than general use. Although the variables are common across the waves, the Arab Barometer changed the questions (e.g., the scale of the government performance scale or the listed civil society organizations) across waves. Most crucially, the *wasta* response options were modified; as such, the results cannot be combined across the time periods.

Those who see more use of *wasta* report that the country has higher levels of corruption in each wave (Table 1), consistent with H1a. This follows Kubbe and Varraich's (2020) assertion that clientelism and corruption are fundamentally connected and the fact that a super-majority of Arab Barometer respondents thought that government figures participating in *wasta* for family members was corruption. The imperfect correlation reflects that *some* individuals do not think of *wasta* as corruption (*fasad*). *Wasta* users do not think the state is more corrupt than non-users (Model 1).

In turn, those who observe *wasta* report that the government is less effective at cracking down on corruption (Appendix A), consistent with H1b. However, these results are muddled by the fact that, in some cases, respondents who reported on the first question that they saw no corruption in the national agencies – and might thus conclude either that their compatriots are scrupulously honest or that the government's anti-corruption efforts have been highly effective – were not asked the second question about cracking down on corruption. *Wasta* users, though, did not report that the government was less effective at addressing corruption (Model 1).

Those who see *wasta* used prevalently attribute lower levels of democracy to their country (Table 2). This is consistent with the expansive conception of democracy described by Arab Barometer respondents, including both electoral institutions and economic egalitarianism. These results align with prior work on Africa and the Arab world, showing that perceiving corruption reduces democratic attribution (Mattes and Bratton 2007; Ridge 2023). H2 is thus upheld. This relationship is not significant with respect to personal usage (Model 1).

For those who see their countries as democracies, their evaluation of their government's performance is lower if they see greater prevalence of *wasta* (Appendix B). This is consistent with H3a and with findings that witnessing corruption and clientelism reduces public confidence in the regime (Seligson 2002; Wang 2020). Contrary to Benstead et al.'s (2020) expectation that citizens will view *wasta* as a marker of citizen services provision and thus be satisfied,

TABLE 1 *Wasta* and Perceptions of Government Corruption

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
(Intercept)	2.38***	2.24***	0.71	2.06***	1.64***
	(0.37)	(0.29)	(0.55)	(0.41)	(0.23)
Used *Wasta*	0.09				
	(0.08)				
Use *Wasta*: Mostly not used		0.91***	1.41***	0.90***	
		(0.16)	(0.35)	(0.19)	
Use *Wasta*: Mostly used		1.66***	2.22***	1.53***	
		(0.17)	(0.30)	(0.29)	
Use *Wasta*: Extremely widespread		0.66**	0.51*	0.44*	
		(0.26)	(0.28)	(0.25)	
Use *Wasta*: Sometimes					0.88***
					(0.13)
Use *Wasta*: Often					1.84***
					(0.14)
Government Performance	-0.06	-0.16***	-0.15***	-0.14***	-0.16***
	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
How Democratic is the Country	-0.06***	-0.01	0.04	-0.06***	-0.02
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.04)
Good National Economy	-0.32	-0.52***	-0.43***	-0.59***	-0.50***
	(0.21)	(0.14)	(0.11)	(0.14)	(0.18)
Free and Fair Elections	-0.47***	-0.36**	-0.36***	-0.64***	-0.07
	(0.10)	(0.18)	(0.11)	(0.16)	(0.16)
Interpersonal Trust	-0.19***	-0.35*	-0.25	-0.12	-0.09
	(0.06)	(0.19)	(0.21)	(0.13)	(0.12)
Age	-0.08*	-0.00	0.00	-0.00	-0.00
	(0.04)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)

TABLE 1   Wasta and Perceptions of Government Corruption (*cont.*)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Male	-0.15***	0.29**	0.18	0.15	0.02
	(0.06)	(0.14)	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.06)
College Education	-0.10	0.45***	-0.06	0.37	0.19**
	(0.15)	(0.16)	(0.24)	(0.45)	(0.08)
Religiosity: Somewhat religious	-0.27**	0.12	0.56***	0.00	0.20**
	(0.11)	(0.13)	(0.18)	(0.15)	(0.10)
Religiosity: Religious	-0.02	0.10	0.39**	0.02	0.15
	(0.13)	(0.27)	(0.18)	(0.16)	(0.12)
Civil Society Member	-0.35***	0.15***	0.43***	0.07	-0.11
	(0.10)	(0.03)	(0.09)	(0.14)	(0.15)
Bahrain	-2.15***				
	(0.04)				
Egypt		-0.63***	0.91***	0.55***	
		(0.13)	(0.21)	(0.07)	
Iraq		1.03***	0.48***		0.45***
		(0.04)	(0.10)		(0.06)
Jordan	-1.21***	-1.23***	0.04	0.06	0.37***
	(0.03)	(0.08)	(0.11)	(0.09)	(0.05)
Kuwait			-0.80***		
			(0.08)		
Lebanon	0.48***	0.44***	0.80***		-0.10
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.22)		(0.07)
Libya			0.61***		0.24**
			(0.15)		(0.10)
Morocco	-0.01		0.32**	0.43***	-0.88***
	(0.03)		(0.14)	(0.09)	(0.05)
Palestine	-1.10***	-1.11***	-0.75***	0.16***	-0.07*
	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.11)	(0.06)	(0.04)
Sudan		-1.18***	-0.96***		-1.03***
		(0.08)	(0.17)		(0.09)
Tunisia		-1.17***	-0.62***	1.04***	0.45***

TABLE 1   Wasta and Perceptions of Government Corruption (*cont.*)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
		(0.09)	(0.15)	(0.05)	(0.11)
Yemen	-0.19***	0.15***	-0.07		-0.18***
	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.14)		(0.07)
N	4176	7374	6708	4402	16620

***p<0.01; **p<0.05; *p<0.1

the results indicate lower performance ratings when citizens observe *wasta*'s being used.[13] Thus, H3b is not substantiated. This finding is consistent with the high proportion who said *wasta* for family members by members of the government is corruption. If the service were available widely or they could be assured it was only given deservedly, possibly they would feel differently. Personal use of *wasta* does not significantly change the performance ratings positively or negatively.

The results are not consistent across the waves for the impact of *wasta* usage on citizens' attitudes towards democracy. In Wave 5, those who see *wasta* as more prevalent say it would be more *appropriate* for their country (Appendix C). Wave 2, however, shows a negative relationship between perceiving *wasta* and democracy's appropriateness. This could reflect the turmoil of the Arab Spring, which was transpiring in this wave. However, that cannot be assessed with observational data. Those who observe *wasta* in action are more likely to say that democracy is the *better* form of government (Table 3). These results are consistent with H4a.

Using *wasta* has a different relationship than seeing *wasta* used by others. The users would not benefit from removing access to *wasta*. In fact, those who reported using *wasta* rate democracy as *less* appropriate for their country (Appendix C). *Wasta*-users, though, were more likely to say democracy is better than other forms of government (Table 3). Thus, these respondents evince a theoretical value for democracy but an unwillingness to sacrifice advantage for that ideal. This is consistent with H4b.

There is a significant interaction between *wasta* perception and democracy rating in shaping attitudes towards democracy's suitability for the country, but the relationship only achieves significance in Wave 5 (Appendix D). Those who saw their countries as democracies are not significantly different in their appropriateness rating based on level of *wasta*. This is not consistent with H5a

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13   The negative effect is also present in un-interacted models.

TABLE 2   *Wasta* and Democracy Ratings

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
(Intercept)	3.02***	3.21***	3.13***	2.86***	2.72***
	(0.35)	(0.39)	(0.22)	(0.46)	(0.44)
Used *Wasta*	-0.10				
	(0.15)				
Use *Wasta*: Mostly not used		-0.27*	-0.28	-0.18	
		(0.16)	(0.27)	(0.19)	
Use *Wasta*: Mostly used		-0.44**	-0.55**	-0.33	
		(0.20)	(0.27)	(0.22)	
Use *Wasta*: Extremely widespread		-0.19	-0.33	-0.03	
		(0.26)	(0.37)	(0.12)	
Use *Wasta*: Sometimes					0.04
					(0.13)
Use *Wasta*: Often					-0.38***
					(0.12)
Government Corruption	-0.39**	-0.06	0.10	-0.20***	-0.11
	(0.16)	(0.12)	(0.11)	(0.07)	(0.18)
Government Performance	0.31***	0.38***	0.48***	0.42***	0.40***
	(0.07)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Good National Economy	0.65***	0.37***	0.43***	0.32**	0.49***
	(0.18)	(0.10)	(0.14)	(0.16)	(0.14)
Free and Fair Elections	0.57***	0.64***	0.66***	0.65***	0.59***
	(0.20)	(0.14)	(0.13)	(0.11)	(0.07)
Interpersonal Trust	0.30**	0.14**	0.20**	0.18**	0.14*
	(0.12)	(0.06)	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.07)
Age	-0.03	-0.00**	-0.00*	0.00	-0.00

TABLE 2　Wasta and Democracy Ratings (*cont.*)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	(0.02)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Male	-0.14	-0.06	-0.00	-0.28***	-0.29**
	(0.11)	(0.05)	(0.09)	(0.06)	(0.12)
College Education	-0.22**	-0.07	0.64***	0.07	0.06
	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.16)	(0.06)
Religiosity: Somewhat religious	-0.35	-0.09*	0.20	0.09	0.18
	(0.21)	(0.05)	(0.15)	(0.19)	(0.11)
Religiosity: Religious	0.10	-0.00	0.27	0.04	0.41***
	(0.13)	(0.08)	(0.21)	(0.18)	(0.15)
Civil Society Member	0.21	0.16**	0.05	0.12*	0.16*
	(0.24)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.09)
Bahrain	-0.89***				
	(0.11)				
Egypt		0.58***	-1.33***	-0.25***	
		(0.07)	(0.10)	(0.07)	
Iraq		-0.40***	-1.04***		0.25**
		(0.03)	(0.05)		(0.11)
Jordan	1.16***	0.74***	-0.20***	1.68***	1.11***
	(0.16)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.09)	(0.08)
Kuwait			-0.73***		
			(0.08)		
Lebanon	-0.93***	0.98***	-0.09		0.70***
	(0.09)	(0.05)	(0.10)		(0.10)
Libya			-0.98***		-1.06***
			(0.11)		(0.12)
Morocco	0.30**		-1.32***	0.13	-0.46***
	(0.13)		(0.06)	(0.09)	(0.05)
Palestine	0.56**	-0.07	-1.01***	-0.35***	-0.44***
	(0.25)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.05)
Sudan		-0.39***	-1.14***		-1.14***
		(0.04)	(0.07)		(0.11)

TABLE 2   Wasta and Democracy Ratings (*cont.*)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Tunisia		-0.09	-1.18***	0.51***	0.72***
		(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.11)
Yemen	-0.37***	0.22***	-1.09***		0.25***
	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.07)		(0.03)
N	4176	7374	6708	4402	16620

***p<0.01; **p<0.05; *p<0.1

or H5b. Among those who view their countries as non-democracies, those who perceive greater *wasta* usage in their country are more likely to say democracy would be appropriate. There is also a significant interaction for believing democracy is a better system of government in Wave 3 (Table 4).[14] This pattern is consistent with H5c.

Among those who use *wasta* themselves, the democracy-*wasta* interaction is significant. At the democracy end, those who used *wasta* were *less* likely to think democracy was appropriate for the country (Appendix D).[15] They were also less likely to think that democracy was the best system of government (Table 4). This is consistent with H5a. The democracy was not delivering without appealing to *wasta*, so they see it as less suitable despite its goodness. By contrast, in the non-democratic setting, citizens may suppose that democratization would reduce the need to appeal to *wasta*.

Discussion and Conclusions

Researchers have well-documented the prevalence of *wasta* in the Middle East (Kaya and Kopstheyn 2020). Although most citizens report not having used it, they recognize its use by others. It can even crowd out access based on right or merit (Jackson et al. 2020). This study has probed the relationship between *wasta* and citizens' attitudes towards their governments and democratization.

14   In Wave 2, the pattern is reversed, with those seeing no *wasta* usage in their in non-democracies are more favorable towards democracy. This could reflect the fact that, for MENA countries, regime-type preferences are not democracy/non-democracy binaries. Democracy is often one option among several acceptable options, including some non-democratic alternatives (Ridge 2023). It could also reflect that Wave 2 occurred during the Arab Spring.

15   At the non-democracy end, those who use *wasta* are more likely to think it is appropriate.

TABLE 3　　*Wasta* and Democracy is Best

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
(Intercept)	1.66***	0.68**	0.36	0.25	0.55
	(0.31)	(0.35)	(0.32)	(0.31)	(0.34)
Used *Wasta*	0.22**				
	(0.11)				
Use *Wasta*: Mostly not used		0.28	0.43**	0.11	
		(0.24)	(0.21)	(0.14)	
Use *Wasta*: Mostly used		0.05	0.61**	0.04	
		(0.20)	(0.27)	(0.15)	
Use *Wasta*: Extremely widespread		-0.24	0.42	-0.05	
		(0.38)	(0.37)	(0.30)	
Use *Wasta*: Sometimes					0.74***
					(0.25)
Use *Wasta*: Often					0.79***
					(0.27)
Government Performance	0.03	0.01	0.01	-0.03	0.02
	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.02)
How Democratic is the Country	0.03	0.03	0.10***	0.16***	0.05***
	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.01)
Government Corruption	-0.13	0.69***	0.25*	0.31*	0.35**
	(0.08)	(0.13)	(0.14)	(0.17)	(0.16)
Good National Economy	0.03	0.13	-0.01	-0.12	-0.21
	(0.07)	(0.15)	(0.12)	(0.10)	(0.16)
Interpersonal Trust	-0.14	0.04	0.06	-0.05	-0.43***
	(0.09)	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.12)	(0.06)
Age	0.02	-0.00	0.01***	-0.00	0.00

TABLE 3   Wasta and Democracy is Best (*cont.*)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	(0.05)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Male	-0.47***	0.14	-0.16*	-0.09	-0.10**
	(0.13)	(0.15)	(0.10)	(0.08)	(0.05)
College Education	0.17	0.03	0.23	-0.27	0.12
	(0.14)	(0.11)	(0.30)	(0.38)	(0.10)
Religiosity: Somewhat religious	0.07	0.22*	-0.12	0.28***	0.17
	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.17)	(0.10)	(0.15)
Religiosity: Religious	-0.18*	-0.01	-0.28	0.29***	0.06
	(0.11)	(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.09)	(0.17)
Civil Society Member	0.06	0.13	0.09	0.27	-0.05
	(0.14)	(0.11)	(0.12)	(0.24)	(0.13)
Bahrain	0.43***				
	(0.06)				
Egypt		-0.45***	0.49***		
		(0.14)	(0.16)		
Iraq		0.08	-0.20**		-0.70***
		(0.07)	(0.08)		(0.06)
Jordan	0.03	-0.30***	-0.36***	0.36***	-0.03
	(0.12)	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.04)
Kuwait			-0.55***		
			(0.06)		
Lebanon	0.99***	-0.20**	0.21**		-0.18***
	(0.04)	(0.09)	(0.11)		(0.06)
Libya			-0.06		-0.55***
			(0.15)		(0.09)
Morocco	0.96***		-0.13	1.10***	-0.50***
	(0.07)		(0.10)	(0.02)	(0.05)
Palestine	-0.13	0.10	-0.09	0.01	-0.55***
	(0.14)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.02)	(0.03)
Saudi Arabia		-0.78***			
		(0.17)			

TABLE 3   *Wasta* and Democracy is Best (*cont.*)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Sudan		-0.10	-0.10		-0.48***
		(0.12)	(0.10)		(0.10)
Tunisia		0.47***	-0.01	0.78***	-0.47***
		(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.04)	(0.09)
Yemen	-0.01	-0.15	-0.58***		-1.50***
	(0.05)	(0.10)	(0.08)		(0.05)
N	4602	8299	7232	4255	19180

***$p<0.01$; **$p<0.05$; *$p<0.1$

This has been considered before (Benstead et al. 2020). However, this study introduces important conditionalities to that relationship. Namely, not all MENA residents live in democracies – in fact most do not. Nonetheless, many Arab citizens assert on surveys that they do. The level of democracy they perceive in their country has a strong impact on the influence of *wasta* on citizens' opinions.

Wasta seems to bear a stronger flavor of corruption than of service provision. Certain uses of *wasta* are specifically identified with corruption. Frequent use of *wasta* is taken as a sign corruption is widespread in that society. Citizens, in turn, think that the government is doing a bad job at addressing the corruption when they see *wasta* in action. Future research should examine the linkage in public opinion between *wasta* and corruption in greater detail. Scholars could probe the factors – especially country-specific features – that make citizens consider particular instances of *wasta* to be corrupt, something about which not all citizens agree. Jones (2022) has already begun this work in Lebanon, but it could be expanded to additional country contexts and to qualitative work. Targeted questions would be useful for linkage analysis. Targeted questions could also tease out the good/bad *wasta* parameters in the public imagination.

Wasta also matters for democratic attitudes, both in terms of how democratization relates to regime attitudes and to their own views on democracy as a system of government. Where citizens see *wasta*, they think their countries are less democratic and they are more favorable towards having democracy in their country. In perceived democracies, prevalent *wasta* makes citizens think worse of the government's performance. Citizens in perceived democracies do not change their stance on democracy with *wasta*; in non-democracies though, citizens who see *wasta* being employed are more likely to think democracy

TABLE 4 *Wasta* and Democracy is Best (Interaction)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
(Intercept)	1.71***	1.42***	-0.11	0.11	0.50
	(0.33)	(0.51)	(0.42)	(0.85)	(0.33)
Used *Wasta*	-0.03				
	(0.12)				
Use *Wasta*: Mostly not used		-0.46	0.91*	0.29	
		(0.72)	(0.51)	(0.78)	
Use *Wasta*: Mostly used		-0.64	1.08**	0.18	
		(0.62)	(0.53)	(0.75)	
Use *Wasta*: Extremely widespread		-2.27**	1.14*	0.08	
		(1.01)	(0.60)	(1.13)	
Use *Wasta*: Sometimes					0.79***
					(0.18)
Use *Wasta*: Often					0.84***
					(0.21)
Government Corruption	-0.13	0.69***	0.24*	0.31*	0.35**
	(0.08)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.16)	(0.16)
How Democratic is the Country	0.02	-0.09	0.18***	0.18	0.06
	(0.04)	(0.08)	(0.05)	(0.14)	(0.04)
Good National Economy	0.03	0.11	-0.01	-0.12	-0.22
	(0.07)	(0.14)	(0.12)	(0.10)	(0.16)
Government Performance	0.03	0.01	0.00	-0.03	0.02
	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.02)
Interpersonal Trust	-0.14	0.04	0.06	-0.05	-0.43***
	(0.09)	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.12)	(0.06)
Age	0.02	-0.00	0.01***	-0.00	0.00
	(0.05)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)

TABLE 4 Wasta and Democracy is Best (Interaction) (*cont.*)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Male	-0.47***	0.13	-0.16	-0.09	-0.10**
	(0.13)	(0.15)	(0.10)	(0.08)	(0.05)
College Education	0.16	0.04	0.23	-0.27	0.12
	(0.14)	(0.11)	(0.29)	(0.38)	(0.10)
Religiosity: Somewhat religious	0.07	0.23*	-0.12	0.28***	0.17
	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.18)	(0.10)	(0.15)
Religiosity: Religious	-0.18	-0.01	-0.28	0.29***	0.06
	(0.11)	(0.18)	(0.19)	(0.09)	(0.17)
Civil Society Member	0.06	0.14	0.09	0.27	-0.05
	(0.14)	(0.10)	(0.12)	(0.24)	(0.13)
Used *Wasta*: How Democratic	0.05*				
	(0.03)				
Use *Wasta*: Mostly not used: How Democratic		0.12	-0.09	-0.03	
		(0.09)	(0.07)	(0.13)	
Use *Wasta*: Mostly used: How Democratic		0.11	-0.09	-0.02	
		(0.08)	(0.06)	(0.11)	
Use *Wasta*: Extremely widespread: How Democratic		0.37**	-0.14*	-0.02	
		(0.14)	(0.08)	(0.18)	
Use *Wasta*: Sometimes: How Democratic					-0.01
					(0.05)
Use *Wasta*: Often: How Democratic					-0.01
					(0.04)
Bahrain	0.43***				
	(0.06)				

TABLE 4   Wasta and Democracy is Best (Interaction) (*cont.*)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Egypt		-0.49***	0.48***		
		(0.13)	(0.17)		
Iraq		0.09	-0.20**		-0.70***
		(0.07)	(0.09)		(0.06)
Jordan	0.04	-0.30***	-0.34***	0.36***	-0.03
	(0.12)	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.04)
Kuwait			-0.54***		
			(0.06)		
Lebanon	0.99***	-0.20**	0.23**		-0.18***
	(0.04)	(0.09)	(0.10)		(0.06)
Libya			-0.07		-0.55***
			(0.15)		(0.08)
Morocco	0.96***		-0.12	1.10***	-0.50***
	(0.07)		(0.10)	(0.02)	(0.05)
Palestine	-0.12	0.10	-0.09	0.02	-0.55***
	(0.14)	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Saudi Arabia		-0.76***			
		(0.17)			
Sudan		-0.11	-0.09		-0.48***
		(0.12)	(0.10)		(0.10)
Tunisia		0.47***	0.00	0.78***	-0.47***
		(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.04)	(0.09)
Yemen	0.00	-0.16	-0.58***		-1.50***
	(0.05)	(0.10)	(0.09)		(0.06)
N	4602	8299	7232	4255	19180

***p<0.01; **p<0.05; *p<0.1

would be a good idea. They could replace the (tacitly) corrupt administration with one that would theoretically be more equitable.

Future research on this point would benefit from more particular questions about the connection citizens see between the (lack of) *wasta* or corruption and democracy (Ridge 2023). The current language used in these types of surveys allows a lot of variation in how citizens perceive *wasta*, corruption, and

democracy. Qualitative interviews, for instance, could unpack the nuances in what citizens believe democracy entails or permits. It could also account for the expansive meaning ascribed to *dimuqratiyya* in these studies. Scholars could additionally examine the impact of country-specific phenomenon on these relationships, such as the role of tribes in Jordan or sectarianism in Iraq or Lebanon. Studies could also assess the extent to which citizens are aware that many current democracies, from Latin America to Europe to the US, include nepotism, clientelism, corruption, and citizen services to varying degrees.

This attitude profile seems to reflect a desire to level the playing field through democratization. Afterall, those who reported using *wasta* were more likely to think democracy was a good idea, but they were less likely to want it for their own country. Those who see *wasta* abounding may want democracy for their country to get rid of that *wasta* advantage the former group was seeking to retain. This area merits further study.

A challenge that democratizing countries face is the possibility that citizens can want democracy to do everything and do it well (Ridge 2023). For instance, it must weed out bad *wasta* while still providing services. This balance continues to challenge many states. The inability to deliver on such promises posed a challenge after the Arab Spring; by this metric, citizens may have considered the movement or democratization a failure. Economic weakness, such as corruption, have been linked to the failures of democratization in Egypt and Tunisia (Hong 2019; Ridge 2022a, 2022b). These findings contribute to our understanding of the roll that the perpetuation of these systems plays in public views of democracy and its utility.

This study has limitations, as do all observational studies. The Arab Barometer questions use subjective assessments of the prevalence of *wasta*. These cannot be benchmarked. Noise in the data from this subjective measurement, though, should work against finding an effect. Secondly, the questions largely focus on other peoples' behavior. Only Wave 1 addresses personal usage. While this phrasing could get around concerns about desirability, *wasta* is quite common and normalized (Jackson et al. 2020; Kubbe and Aiysha Varraich 2020). Mis-reporting cannot be ruled out, but there is no reason to think that it is systematically coordinated with attitudes towards democracy. Additionally, the most recent results are from 2018. Personal *wasta* usage reports are only available for 2007. The surveys provide a good time span, but more recent data is always would be preferable.

There also remains substantial future work to be done on *wasta* politics. More data on who uses *wasta* and for what would be informative. The current question asks about the amount of *wasta* used in the country in acquiring employment. The use of *wasta* in other domains should also be considered. For

instance, questions could formally break-down the use of *wasta* in the public sector compared to the private sector or the influence of *wasta* based on different connections. Government workers and tribal leaders as connections would likely relate to different requests than those directed at religious leaders; religious leaders may also come with different cultural expectations and relate differently to regime attitudes. Additional research could finesse these nuances. Access to networks has been found, under certain circumstances, to promote democracy interest or authoritarian tolerance (Jamal 2007). Understanding the *wasta* usage within these networks could contribute to our understanding of how civil society membership impacts democratization potential. It would also be useful to probe the knock-on effects of *wasta*-usage on other attitudes. Do they change depending on the type of *wasta* used? Does *wasta* influence a sense of self-efficacy, attitudes towards taxation, or intergroup affect? Some of these questions can be evaluated with the existing data. Other questions would require new material.

The Middle East faces ongoing challenges in democratization and in corruption. *Wasta*'s connection to corruption is worrying for outside observers and for citizens who would prefer equal access. Still, while widespread use of *wasta* may make corruption more tolerated in the short term (Kaya and Koptshteyn 2020), it could favor democratization in the long term. The need for and use of *wasta* makes citizens less satisfied with their current non-democratic governments. Observing *wasta* is also increasing their interest in democracy as an alternative, which could be a boon to democratization. The question is still open, though, whether citizens would retain anti-corruption policies if they were to stamp out *wasta* along with *fasad*.

Acknowledgements

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