Some Middle Eastern Arab countries are wealthy; others battle economic decline and high unemployment. None is experiencing the internally-generated economic growth of East Asia. Middle Eastern economies, adversely affected by the declining price of oil, also suffer from widespread "wasta". This essay defines wasta, reviews its economic environment, illustrates wasta practices and implications, then addresses the wasta problem.

THE WASTA CONCEPT

"Wasta" may mean either mediation or intercession. It denotes the person who mediates/intercedes as well as the act of mediation/intercession.

Intermediary wasta endeavors to resolve inter-personal or inter-group conflict. A jaha (wajaha', mediation group of notable emissaries sent by the perpetrator's family to the victim's family) acts to inhibit revenge being taken following an incident involving personal injury. The jaha seeks a truce between the parties, with the hope of an eventual agreement to resolve the conflict.

Wasta as mediation has a long and honorable history. In a tribal setting, wasta mediation binds families and communities for peace and well-being in a hostile environment. This face of wasta benefits society as a whole, as well as the parties involved.

Intercessory wasta involves a protagonist intervening on behalf of a client to obtain an advantage for the client - a job, a government document, a tax reduction, admission to a prestigious university. Many individuals, supported by their wasta backers, may be seeking the same benefit. When the seekers for a benefit are many and the opportunities are few, only aspirants with the strongest wastas are successful. Succeeding or failing depends on the power of the wastas more than on the merits of the seekers.(1)

Intercessory wasta angers unsuccessful candidates who have outstanding credentials, and creates dependencies among those who are less capable, yet obtain power and position because of their wastas. Competition for positions and resources increases the importance of intercessory wasta. In the wider society, critics condemn intercessory wasta as illegal and/or inefficient; paradoxically, these critics continue to seek and provide wasta benefits.


THE ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

Middle Eastern economies often rise and fall as a result of external factors over which they have little control. Guns and oil offered an economic windfall to the Middle East after World War II. The U.S. and USSR competed for the opportunity to provide military and economic aid to Middle Eastern governments. Oil beneath the desert sands brought revenues which allowed many governments to provide benefits to citizens without having to demand in return any change
in citizen attitudes or behavior. Most Middle Eastern Arab counties are either directly dependent on petroleum (Saudi Arabia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Kuwait, UAE, Yemen, Iraq, Algeria) or dependent on revenues from their oil producing neighbors - government to government or citizen to citizen (Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Egypt).

Wealthy Middle Eastern nations acquired their riches not primarily by hard work, but by accident of nature. King Idriss reportedly said of the Libyan oil discoveries, "I wish it could have been water. Oil makes men idle, whereas water makes them work" (Savage 1991). When money comes easily, the competitive edge is dulled, and dependency follows as a way of life, for families and for countries. The cultural norm of individual dependency is paralleled by international dependency relationships.

With the cold war over, and their own economies sputtering, Western nations have become less tolerant of waste and economic inefficiency in aid-receiving countries. Taiwan, Korea, Thailand, and Singapore have demonstrated that late-arrivals to the world's economic game can become successful, independent nations despite few natural resources. The World Bank, IMF, and economically developed countries are telling developing nations to restructure their economies and to live within their means. A country's standard of living should reflect its productivity.

Intercessory wasta is a commonly cited reason for ineffective or unfair government systems. Taming wasta has no easy answer, or it would have been already proclaimed and implemented. Remedies imported from the West - reforming administrative structures, strengthening the oversight/audit function, and privatization - have not stemmed the wasta tide (Cunningham and Sarayrah 1993).(2) In difficult economic times, the search for a wasta solution intensifies. This essay explores the role of wasta in society and economy, and suggests that wasta can be directed toward governmental effectiveness and economic growth.

WASTA AND THE FAMILY

In Middle Eastern countries the family is the primary wasta channel.(3) Wasta-based recruitment and allocation of benefits reinforce family ties, thereby connecting the individual to the economy and polity. Family as the basis for obtaining benefits from the socio-political system enhances societal stability by providing a link between individual and nation. Originally based upon family loyalty, wasta relationships have expanded to include friends and acquaintances, as well as private agreements whereby services are provided in exchange for gifts or specific fees.

From an economic effectiveness perspective, how people are admitted to the university or hired for a job is less important than their performance in class or on the job. The wasta threat to a nation's productivity lies less in wasta-based recruitment, than upon a non-functioning performance feedback system. If performance appraisal is ignored, or responds to the particularistic criteria of one's family and social connections, then the nation's economy is at risk. The primary economic effect of wasta lies not in wasta-based hiring, but in the failure to train, motivate, monitor, counsel, and, if necessary, terminate.

Proposed here is that the wasta intercessor be treated as guarantor. The guarantor would assume responsibility for ensuring effective performance from a wasta client. If necessary, the guarantor would play the traditional mediator role between the aggrieved organization and the person accused of performing ineffectively.

ATTITUDES TOWARD INTERCESSORY WASTA

The widespread practice of wasta in the Middle East is assumed. To communicate the wasta
mind-set, four stories show diverse approaches to wasta situations.

For people like Ahmad, choices and behaviors are defined by intercessory wasta expectations.

Ahmad the Surveyor. (4)

Ahmad Abroad graduated from his village high school with average grades. His proud parents gave him a graduation party. Worried about the unemployment problem in Jordan, his parents were hoping for wasta help from some of their important guests. Several days later Ahmad's father started the hard job of getting him a position, any position. He accompanied Ahmad to Amman to meet a prominent relative who had just retired from an important position in the public service. There was no need for the prominent relative to inquire about the purpose of the visit, because its timing - shortly after the high school examination results were published - indicated its purpose.

The prominent relative mentioned that he had Abroad in mind even before the visit, and he briefly talked about the difficult economic times in the country. Ahmad's father described the family's desperate situation, how they had been waiting all these long years for Ahmad to graduate. The important relative hesitantly threw out a suggestion, which he had to withdraw very quickly so as not to offend his visiting relatives. He mentioned that a good friend of his owned a plastics factory outside Amman, and that his friend needed someone to inspect finished goods and to sort out defective products. Both knew that the job involved manual labor, and Ahmad's father gave a look that indicated refusal.

Most traditional Jordanians think it inappropriate for an educated person to do manual labor. Clerical work is deemed the only appropriate job, irrespective of the job market. The prominent relative wrote in his notebook, said he would keep his eyes and ears open, and would get in touch with them when something came up. The father suggested that the prominent relative use his influence with his friends in the agency from which he retired, but that was quickly dismissed on the grounds that so many family members worked in that agency that it can absorb no more.

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. According to the father, Ahmad had severe depression because he was without work. Fortunately, a friend of Ahmad's prominent relative was appointed Director of the Land Agency, and many relatives, including Ahmad, were appointed as surveyors. None had experience, so all received a short course teaching them the rudiments of surveying. A short while after Ahmad got the job, his prominent relative was pressured to help transfer Abroad at least to his home province, if not his village. Many argued on Ahmad's behalf as follows: You helped him get the job, so finish your good work by helping him get a transfer. They went on to say that a person has very few opportunities in life. When these opportunities come, one should exploit them. If transferred, Ahmad could stay with his family instead of renting, and could support them instead of spending his money in Amman. The relative naturally promised help if the agency needed staff in the province where Ahmad wanted to transfer. Ahmad's family quickly assured the relative that agencies always need more staff than they have, and that the agency can find work for Ahmad if pressured.

1· Ahmad got a transfer to his province, but the pressure on his relative continued, this time to obtain him a supervisory position. A supervisory position is not only more prestigious, but it also gives the right to use an agency's vehicle to tour surveying sites, and would give other fringe benefits. The prominent relative was told that this was Ahmad's chance and that he should be helped to obtain it. Concerns of the prominent relative about the public interest and the interests
of the agency were dismissed, actually ridiculed, by family members. To them, "the state" is a vague, distant concept, the comprehensible loyalty lies in the collective interest of the family.

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.

The Jordanian civil service adopts a tolerant attitude toward administrator behavior. A reasonable amount of coming late and leaving early, and using government property for personal use, is overlooked. Prudent use of the agency car to do errands is allowed, and personal use of office supplies is accepted. Excessive norm-breaking will reach the ears of those in the head office, and they may have to take disciplinary action. Wasta can cover up some wrongdoing, but it is not in the interest of the agency or the wasta to push things beyond reasonable limits.

Ahmad is at the edge of exceeding reasonable limits. It is said that he goes to work late, which is hard to hide in a small city when the vehicle prominently displays the agency name. He reportedly uses the agency car for private business, and as a supervisor is so lenient with the agency employees from his own tribe that one of them reports to work only at the end of each month to collect his pay check.

There are fears that once the present director of the agency, who is a friend of Ahmad's family, retires, Ahmad's fortunes will ebb once more. Ahmad thinks it foolish to be a loyal public servant because rewards are not based on loyalty and efficiency, but on the strength of one's wasta. It is his turn to take as much advantage of his position as possible, before wheels turn and somebody else takes the position. He thinks that once the organization takes the best one has to offer, it spits him away, and that he will take the best he can before they spit him away.

Ahmad is unqualified for his position, and squanders this opportunity to enhance his skills or to improve the effectiveness of the agency. Some subordinates point to favoritism in his supervisory practices. Ahmad does not care. By luck he got this position, when luck turns against him he will again entreat his wasta to work to find him a position. The mind-set is not one of using the opportunity for self-improvement or client service, but for short-term personal and family aggrandizement.

On the other hand, particularistic criteria may mean firing with no chance to prove oneself.

Hired and Fired

The manager of a public agency participated in a development training program taught by Professor Nizar. Naif, Professor Nizar's nephew, sought his uncle's wasta assistance in getting a job in that agency, and in arranging the work hours to accommodate the times necessary to attend classes at the university. Naif was hired. Six months later the manager telephoned Professor Nizar to say that Naif was not performing the job effectively. Professor Nizar spoke to Naif about the problem, but before Naif had time to show improved performance, the manager fired him. From the facts it is impossible to tell whether Naif was a poor performer, whether he changed, and whether the manager initially hired Naif with the intention to fire him after a short time, regardless of his performance level. Professor Nizar thinks that the manager did not treat Naif fairly, and criticizes the behavior of the manager. From the cultural point of view, it would
have been better for the manager not to hire Naif in the first place. The following method of handling a similar situation is more culturally acceptable.

Timid Confrontation

Rashid served as wasta to get his cousin Majdy a bank position. Majdy began to come late and to spend time chatting with the customers rather than tending to the job. To correct this problem the manager did not approach Rashid directly, but asked some subordinates to get word to Rashid that his cousin Majdy was in danger of losing his job. Rashid set an appointment with the bank manager, and, after coffee, tea, and ample time for "grooming talk" (Muna 1980), they got down to business. The manager praised Majdy's good qualities, and extolled the significant heritage and honor of his family, then mentioned that Majdy had two small problems that prevented him from being an outstanding employee. Rashid assured the manager that he would talk to Majdy, and that hopefully the problems would be corrected. As a result, Majdy improved his behavior and kept his job.

In this situation, each side respects the position of the other, and the confrontation is carried out within the cultural traditions. Everyone's honor is maintained, yet the need for effectiveness on the job is established as the criterion for keeping the position. The burden is on Majdy to perform, for he may be fired unless he changes his ways. In this case, both wasta and manager showed respect for the other (but not for Majdy). The bond between them and their families, even though the manager and Rashid had limited personal relations, is strengthened. The style used by a manager in confronting the wasta depends on the amount of trust between them. Interpersonal trust allows frank communication; a weak trust bond renders the formal, indirect confrontation system more acceptable culturally.

The indirect warning system communicates additional useful information to the manager. If the wasta does not respond to the manager's message that the protege is in trouble, that signals to the manager that the wasta may not have a close tie to the protege, which means that the employee could be dismissed without the likelihood of retaliation. Direct communication between the manager and the wasta in the absence of a trust bond may be interpreted by the wasta as a threat, which risks pre-emptive retaliation. The wasta may fire an employee from the manager's family, if that is possible, or sometime in the future act against that manager's interest.

If Majdy does not improve his performance, Majdy can be fired, although firing will not be received well by the culture. More culturally acceptable is to nag Majdy and to complain about his poor performance to others until Majdy improves, or leaves his position so that the manager will not have to fire him. Firing is a confrontive action less appropriate culturally than nagging and complaining. From an organizational effectiveness perspective, direct discussion with Majdy about his performance is a better solution. Direct communication clarifies issues, focuses on the problem rather than the person (Fisher and Ury 1983), deals with the matter quickly, and allows relationships to be restored (Cunningham 1989). Nagging and complaining increase the likelihood of miscommunication, all sides seeing the issue as a personal rather than as a professional issue, and as a result failing to deal with the problem (Argyris 1986).

In a society unaccustomed to universal decision-making criteria, the policy of applying objective standards to individual performance cannot be successfully implemented because cultural support for universalistic performance appraisal is weak. The following story exemplifies the
Jordanian teachers dislike being assigned to outlying villages, away from their homes or away from the city. This especially impacts women teachers. The culture frowns upon a female working away from home. However, because of the severe unemployment problem, job applicants of both sexes accept employment "in exile" as a temporary arrangement until wasta effects a transfer.

In the Ministry of Education, transfer accomplished by wasta was standard practice before Abu Wahhab became Personnel Director. Because he came from a major tribe in Kerak, at the beginning of his appointment as personnel manager friends and relatives flooded his office with requests for transfer. It did not take Abu Wahhab long to realize that he would drown in a sea of wasta unless he stemmed the tide.

To the surprise of kin and friends, Abu Wahhab no longer responds to wasta. Shtayan went to the office of his old friend Abu Wahhab seeking a transfer for his sister. Abu Wahhab received Shtayan with a big smile, recalling with pleasure their childhood days and games. But he would not transfer Shtayan's sister. Abu Wahhab showed him the log where he files requests according to turn. No exceptions are made. Pressure from his sister and the family forced Shtayan to talk to Abu Wahhab's cousin, the head of a large public agency. The cousin called Abu Wahhab, who repeated to his cousin what he had already told Shtayan about the transfer policy.

It seems that wasta in the Ministry of Education is so widespread that the decision makers are supportive of his efforts. All transfer requests are referred to Abu Wahhab, who simply files them according to turn. Socially, Abu Wahhab's reputation is being attacked by parents and relatives of teachers who are having to work in distant villages until they obtain transfers. One cannot but sympathize with these teachers who work outside their villages and towns. Salaries are so low that after paying for rent and food, little is left for savings or to support their families. Many get financial support from their families, not the other way around.

People in his hometown, including his family, cannot comprehend Abu Wahhab's loyalty to formal rules. Many think he was given the Personnel Director position because of his family name, not because he is qualified. He is sabotaging their interests because he should be using his position to extend favors to them. They pity him, and their luck. One of Abu Wahhab's relatives asked Shtayan to help his daughter obtain a teaching position with the Ministry of Education. When Shtayan suggested that the man should go to his relative Abu Wahhab, he lowered his head and murmured, "Allah gives meat to eat to those who have no teeth," meaning that the personnel position is a wonderful blessing, but its occupant, Abu Wahhab, does not acknowledge and use the blessing.

Intercessory wasta is the societal norm. One uses a government position to take care of relatives so that the favor will be reciprocated by another in the family at one's time of need. Family loyalty serves as insurance. Reciprocity is the basis for social relations; a government position is a resource to be exploited rather than an opportunity to serve one's country and to obtain satisfaction from a job well-done. The societal mind-set goes counter to Abu Wahhab's view of his position. By sticking to the rules Abu Wahhab is not admired, and cuts himself off from his
family. Who will take care of him when he retires?

There are few Abu Wahhabs, and with high unemployment and high demand for the limited number of positions available, government managers are unlikely to have Abu Wahhab's strong will. He faces attacks from both his family, which does not respect him; and from clients, who do not understand the decisions or the reasoning. His dedication to organizational rules is incomprehensible, seen as both unjust and stupid; unjust because societal values dictate that relatives are always to be favored without question; stupid because Abu Wahhab has the opportunity to give favors - and consequently to have his favors reciprocated by others, thereby ensuring his future.

Few managers have such fortitude. Abu Wahhab is a tragic figure - following organizational rules, receiving little support for his efforts, and shunned by his relatives. It is not reasonable to expect public employees to hold out against these pressures.

WASTA AS A COLLECTIVE ACTION PROBLEM

Intercessory wasta exemplifies the collective action problem (Olson 1965; Hardin 1977). In the collective action problem, behavior which furthers one's individual interest harms the collective interest. The short-run individual interest of each family head is to back the cause of a family member, even if the case has no merit. Driving out competence by ignoring merit and performance diminishes the nation's economic competitiveness.

Hardin's (1977) solution to the collective action problem is for the community to impose rules and to enforce those rules. But the community appears at present uncommitted to values which favor competence. Olson (1965) states that where a few large producers dominate a market, they can collude to overcome the problem. By analogy, the top political and social leaders can join together to reduce or eliminate intercessory wasta. So far, this has not occurred.

A WASTA CONFRONTATION MODEL

How can performance standards be upheld while maintaining key cultural values? The timid confrontation of the bank manager may work, but gossip and innuendo are long-term and do not build employee self-esteem. Is there not a better approach? One strategy is to see intercessory wasta and performance not as "either/or" but as "both/and". Particularistic recruitment accompanies universalistic performance assessment; thereby setting in motion new behavior expectations. The following description of how Professor Jureidat deals with students may be taken as a model.

When Professor Jureidat receives a call requesting his help on behalf of a student, Jureidat sets up a meeting including himself, the student, the father, and the professor with whom the student has a problem. After a half hour of tea, coffee, and social conversation, the faculty member's perspective is heard; then the father has a chance to speak. After these introductory statements, Jureidat asks the faculty member to outline what will be necessary to resolve this matter in a way that accords with the wishes of the father. Specific requirements for student performance are stated. Then Jureidat turns to the father and asks if the proposal is acceptable. Negotiation continues as long as needed. Everyone understands the agreement, and standards are maintained. Handshakes and mutual praise seal the accord. Thereafter, it is up to the student to fulfill the contract.
In arriving at the contract, traditional interaction patterns are followed, but the father and his son are guaranteed nothing. If the son does not perform as specified in the agreement, an unsatisfactory grade can be awarded. Students who receive falling grades in their classes may complain, but the sting is taken out of the family's complaint. The teacher (or a manager) is on defensible ground within both traditional and modern value systems.

Wasta-based decision and allocation systems are politically effective, and can be economically effective if a quality control mechanism is in place. A quality control system in accordance with traditional values holds the wasta responsible for the performance of the client. The wasta must be a guarantor who assumes responsibility for the performance of the client.

The traditional tribal wasta, the shaykh, was a man of honor, whose word was his bond, who would assume responsibility for his acts. Today's wasta is too often a middle-man, seeking fame and fortune by doing favors. Penalties for misrepresentation do not exist. The Western scourge of caveat emptor [let the buyer beware!] has crept into an honor-based system. Truth tees before expediency.

As Middle Eastern writers have stated: look not just to the West for guidance in solving Middle Eastern problems; search the Arab traditions for answers to current problems (Ayubi 1986; El-Tayab 1986; Wiarda 1983). Turning wasta back to its origins and employing the wasta principle of mediation as a pre-emptive quality control mechanism can generate both effective performance and societal harmony.

Wasta favors those connected to well-established families and social groups. Leaders appear as wasta-oriented as the rest of society, and profit most from the wasta system. Correcting wasta excesses from the societal apex can be an effective strategy, but present leaders show little inclination to accept this challenge. The unconnected are disadvantaged, and must attach themselves to a larger social grouping. In the desert, smaller tribes attached themselves to larger tribes, and prospered. To prosper, the weak must ally with the strong.

A wasta system can provide social, psychological, and economic well-being, but it cannot do so without a feedback mechanism to ensure effective performance. So far, a functioning feedback system has been lacking. Until the dissatisfaction of those disadvantaged by wasta becomes a significant political issue, or the concern for declining societal productivity becomes a national priority, intercessory wasta excesses will continue.

CONCLUSION

Economic growth is spurred by a social system that prizes fairness and effectiveness - fairness being societally determined; effectiveness governed by the market. A family-based recruitment system does not necessarily hinder economic effectiveness. The thriving family firms of East Asia recruit internally, depend on members of the family, and also demand competent performance (Greenhalgh 1988; Kim and Kim 1989; Winckler 1988). Middle Eastern citizens can be offered comfort and security in return for competent performance. Combining fairness to family and market effectiveness requires sensitivity and skill by the family/organization leader and flexibility among family members.

Working within cultural constraints to maintain achievement values is time-consuming, but the process can succeed. To fight poor performance, wasta must be incorporated into the quality
control system. A system which involves the wasṭa in quality control for employees or students does not go counter to cultural values in the same way as without warning to award a failing grade or to fire an employee. Implementing an early warning system to deal with poor performance is time-consuming and socially awkward, but the price is small compared to the long-term consequences of passing students unable to comprehend the subject matter, or ignoring shoddy work by employees.

Resolving conflicts and improving work habits demand patience and persistence. Proclaiming regulations, changing laws, or instituting audit procedures rarely are effective in altering deep-seated societal behavior patterns. Taming wasṭa, like implementing any significant social change, requires accommodating significant social values while pushing for effective performance.

NOTES

1. When the files of candidates are circulated, cards and notes from the wasṭas are attached, thereby clearly defining one's sponsor(s).

2. Another way is to adopt policies that minimize choice at the implementation stage. For discussion of this option see Cunningham and Sarayrah (1994).

3. A political party, ethnic/religious affiliation, personal friendship, or material compensation may also motivate a wasṭa intervention.

4. The several stories reported here come from Cunningham and Sarayrah (1993).

5. This assumption counters directly the capitalist assumption that societal members pursuing individual interests results in collective benefits.

6. The problems caused by a failure to communicate are demonstrated by the story of "Cousin Muwaffaq;" see Cunningham and Sarayrah (1993, pp. 108-110).

7. Effectiveness criteria keep changing. Weberian bureaucracy and adherence to universal rules were once seen as the standard. Now hierarchies are being dismantled, and businesses are breaking out into smaller units, and making their own decisions. Re-inventing Government (Osborne and Gaebler 1992) is a public sector exemplification of this phenomenon.

8. Some citizen behaviors can be modified if the policy is easy to implement. For a discussion of effecting social change in this way, see Cunningham and Sarayrah (1994).

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