





REVIEW ARTICLE



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Wasta in business management: a critical review of recent developments and future trends in the tourism sector

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Wasta is a concept that is widespread across the Middle East, and practiced as a common and acceptable culture in most Middle East based business organizations. While the *wasta* practice is common and is followed as part of the usual organizational culture in the Middle East, yet, its implications are not all positive for the overall employee and organizational performance, which will be highlighted in the current paper in detail. It encourages inter-personal connections and networking of individuals to be used in order to obtain jobs, based on personnel connection rather than merit, which has huge negative impacts on the business. This paper, therefore, presents a detailed discussion on *wasta* and its implications considering business organizations across the Middle East. The tourism sector will be the area of the focus for the present work. The impacts of such activities on the tourism sector are significant on recruitment, teamwork, training, reward system, and overall HRM practices, which raise questions on whether this concept should indeed be as common in practice as it is currently. This paper studied the phenomena of *wasta* in the Middle East in details and proposed framework for *Wasta-free* Management. Also, recommendation for practice for tourism sector in the middle East along with suggestions for further research are presented.

Introduction

W*asta* is a common behavior in the Middle Eastern countries and its origin in the Arabic language could mean “the Middle”. It implies the presence of a middle connection, or middleman between two individuals, wherein one individual is somebody seeking for a job (party number 1), and another one is someone who has a job to offer (party number 2). Hence, it is indicated that individuals often leverage their personal connections to secure employment, as highlighted by Ali and Weir (2020). The previous study offered comprehensive insights into the concept of “wasta” in the Near East region. The researchers concluded that while forms of corruption, such as *wasta*, are prevalent across various sectors in the area, they pose a significant challenge to professionals operating within the scope of the examined region. Notably, the current understanding of *wasta* remains restricted, lacking cohesion, and devoid of a solid theoretical foundation, as outlined by Ali and Weir (2020). This current endeavor strives to address these existing gaps in the scholarly discourse, with a

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particular focus on the tourism sector within Middle Eastern countries, aiming to not only identify a void in existing literature but also to outline its potential contribution.

In the past, *wasta* was used as a positive activity to support close friends, family members and social networks in the Middle East, according to Al-thbah (2021). However, over time *wasta* has changed from a positive act to a negative act with severe consequences (Ali and Weir, 2020; Al-thbah, 2021). To put it more simply, *wasta* can be classified into two broad groups; namely traditional *wasta*, which was used in the past to make peace between individuals and tribes in the ancient Arab world, as per Al-thbah (2021). In addition to the modern *wasta*, which is used recently to gain personal benefits in the workplace in the Middle East (Al-thbah, 2021). This *wasta* classification proposed by Al-thbah (2021) is also in line with the work of Ali and Weir (2020). Modern *wasta* has many negative consequences such as lower effectiveness as well as poor organizational performance.

As asserted by Al-thbah (2021), the concept of “*wasta*” has garnered substantial attention within contemporary literature, standing as one of the most extensively examined and deliberated subjects. Throughout time, scholars from diverse corners of the globe, encompassing both developing and developed nations, have investigated *wasta*, approaching it from diverse points. These investigations include various dimensions such as the core of *wasta*, its indicators across disparate societies, its organizational repercussions on a macro level, as well as its consequences for personnel on a micro level (Al-Twal, 2021).

However, despite this comprehensive scholarly exploration, a noticeable oversight emerges in the literature—the scant attention accorded to the interaction between *wasta* activities and the human resources department within organizational frameworks. This particular void in the literature represents an unexplored area, offering new ground for investigation and insight. The present study aims not only recognizing the gap within the existing literature but also acknowledging its potential to yield valuable contributions.

This study holds significant value as it investigates the issue of “*wasta*,” which has been causing negative effects. The aim is to study the root causes of *wasta* and propose effective solutions. Notably, this study stands out as one of the early attempts to thoroughly examine *wasta*'s impact on the tourism sector. It is worth noting that *wasta* has not been extensively studied worldwide. This study contributes by shedding light on an underexplored area. Additionally, this research has implications for promoting ethical practices within businesses. However, the importance of this study extends beyond academia. Companies aiming to operate in the Middle East can apply the following findings practically. By adopting these recommendations, they could foster a more ethical and productive tourism industry in the region, reducing the negative consequences of *wasta*. To sum up, this study addresses a gap in current knowledge and offers the potential to instigate positive changes in the Middle East.

Research questions and search strategy

The following are the main research questions will be addressed by the current study:

- What is the current status of literature review in the tourism research?
- How does *wasta* impact different aspects of business management, particularly in the tourism sector?
- What are the cultural and ethical considerations associated with *wasta* in the Middle East?
- What insights can be gained from the current literature of *Wasta*, and how can these insights can formulate a strong conceptual framework applicable for tourism sector?

The search strategy employed in the present study is based on a systematic approach. The literature included in the current study include all research focusing on the historical development of *wasta*, its impact on business management, and its implications for the tourism sector.

Research methodology

The existing literature on *wasta* offers valuable insights into its broad implications, but a clear research gap emerges concerning its specific dynamics within the tourism sector in the Middle East. While the current body of knowledge predominantly concentrates on the general organizational implications of *wasta*, there is a notable lack of attention to tourism. This gap indicates the need for a focused exploration into how *wasta* interact with the unique context of the tourism industry, addressing the specific challenges and stakeholder relationships inherent in this sector.

In addition, while existing studies outline contributions to the understanding of *wasta*, there is a need for research that focuses on the practical implementation of change management strategies for *wasta*-free practices within the tourism sector.

To address the identified research gaps and contribute to a comprehensive understanding of *wasta*'s implications in the tourism sector in the Middle East, a systematic research approach will be employed in the current study as shown in Fig. 1.

By following these steps, the present paper can provide a comprehensive and critical analysis of existing research on *wasta* in business management, with a focus on its implications in the tourism sector in the Middle East.

Current status of literature review in tourism research

The phenomenon of *wasta* has attracted considerable attention in recent years, leading to a growing body of literature exploring its implications in various contexts (Samara, 2021; Yan and Qi, 2021). This section will provide an overview of the current status of the literature review.

Weir's work in 2020 contributes to the understanding of *wasta* by presenting a holistic model that bridges the micro-macro divide. Although not exclusively focused on tourism, this study lays the groundwork for comprehending the broader implications of *wasta* across different sector. Alsarhan et al. (2021) investigated the gender dimension of *wasta*, focusing on how it influences Human Resources Management practitioners. It provides insights into the broader organizational context, which can be relevant when considering the tourism sector.

Alsarhan and Valax (2021) contributes to the conceptualization of *wasta* and its consequences in Human Resource Management. The insights gained from the work of Alsarhan and Valax (2021) about the HRM perspective can be extrapolated to understand the potential effects of *wasta* on HR practices in the tourism sector. Alsarhan (2022) proposed a change management roadmap for adopting *wasta*-free managerial practices in Arab organizations. The study of Alsarhan (2022) offers practical recommendations that can be applied across sectors, including tourism.

Baranik et al. (2023) explored the relationship between *wasta* and employment status and income in the Arab Middle East. It provides valuable insights into the broader socio-economic implications of *wasta*. Zhang et al. (2021) compared different informal interorganizational business relationships, including *wasta*, and their impact on customer loyalty. Their study offers insights into how informal networks may affect business relationships.

Helal et al. (2023) explored the navigation of *wasta* in business practices in Lebanon. It provides a contextual understanding of *wasta* in a specific geographic and business context that may have

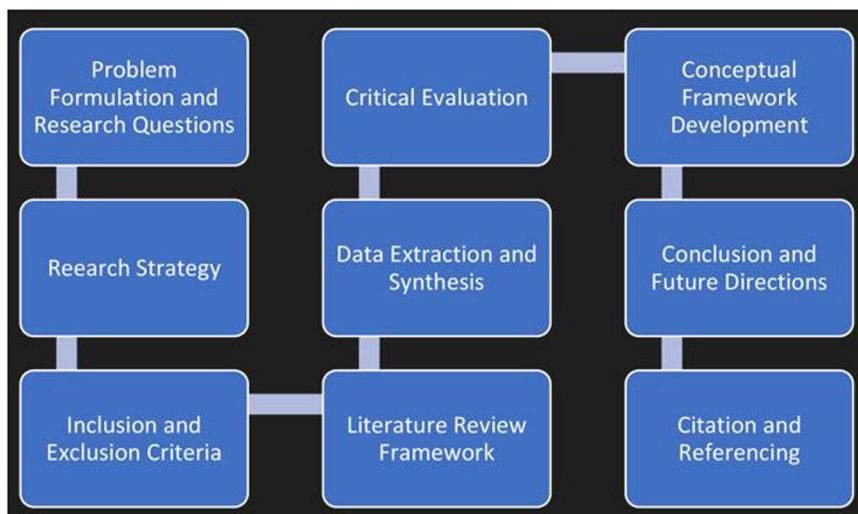


Fig. 1 The research methodology adopted in the current study. Each box represents a key stage in the research process, including Problem Formulation and Research Questions, Research Strategy, Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria, Literature Review Framework, Data Extraction and Synthesis, Critical Evaluation, Conceptual Framework Development, Conclusion and Future Directions, and Citation and Referencing. This flowchart guides the progression of the study from initial inquiry to final analysis, providing a structured approach to research execution and interpretation.

Table 1 Overview of wasta studies and their contribution to literature review in the tourism sector.

Study	Focus	Contribution to literature review
Weir (2020)	Holistic model of wasta	Foundational understanding of wasta’s broader impact. Not tourism-specific but applicable to organizational contexts.
Alsarhan et al. (2021)	Gender and wasta in HRM	Insights into how wasta influences HR practices, applicable to understanding potential effects in tourism HR practices
Alsarhan and Valax (2021)	Conceptualization and consequences in HRM	General insights into wasta’s consequences in HRM.
Alsarhan (2022)	Change management for wasta-free practices	Practical recommendations for wasta-free managerial practices.
Baranik et al. (2023)	Wasta, employment status, and income	Explores socio-economic implications of wasta.
Zhang et al. (2021)	Informal business relationships and customer loyalty	Examines various informal relationships, including wasta, relevant for understanding business dynamics in tourism.
Helal et al. (2023)	Navigating wasta in Lebanon	Contextual understanding of wasta in Lebanon, applicable to businesses, including those in tourism
Adham (2022)	Neo-patriarchy and wasta in a Saudi organization	Explores the informal mode of management, providing insights that may be relevant in understanding organizational dynamics in tourism.
Alsarhan (2021)	Grasping the Concept of Wasta in HRM in the Middle East	Understanding the concept of wasta in HRM.
Ta’amnha et al. (2023A)	Wasta in the Middle East	Provides insights into wasta in the Middle East, potentially applicable to understanding business practices in the region.
Al-Ma’aitah et al. (2021)	Wasta effects on supply chain relationships in the Middle East	Explores the impact of wasta on supply chain relationships.
Al-Twal (2022)	The psychology of offering Wasta	Inferences from narratives, offering psychological insights into the practice of wasta, applicable in various organizational contexts.
Alsarhan and Al-Twal (2023)	Relationships between economics, tribalism, and wasta in the workplace	Explores the interplay between economic factors, tribalism, and wasta, with potential implications for workplace dynamics in tourism.
Ta’amnha et al. (2023B)	Wasta in the Middle East: Corruption or Opportunity	Examines whether wasta is perceived as corruption or an opportunity in the Middle East, relevant for ethical considerations in the tourism sector.
Alsarhan and Valax (2019)	Perception of inequity in the Middle Eastern Public Sector	Explores the perception of inequity related to wasta.

implications for the broader business environment, including tourism. Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the focus and relevance of each referenced study to the tourism sector.

In summary, the current literature on wasta in the context of tourism is still evolving, with a limited number of studies directly addressing this intersection. However, existing research in related fields provides valuable insights that can be applied to understand the potential implications of wasta on the tourism sector. As the discourse continues, future research can explore deeper into the

specific dynamics of wasta within the tourism industry, offering tailored recommendations and insights for practitioners in this field, which will be addressed by the current paper.

Wasta in the Mideast region

Considering the Mideast region, the concept can be said to be widespread, and it is actually part of daily activities in the region under investigation. In the region under study, *wasta* determines

how the organization of economic activities is achieved, and accordingly resource allocation is determined. The presence of *wasta* in the region can be traced back to traditional times—in tribal lives, when it was used for purposes of mediation, as discussed by Baranik et al. (2023). Over time, there has been significant evolution in the *wasta* activities. Moving forward to today, *wasta* has its key role played in acquiring economic growth and development for the region (Talib, 2017). However, the previous study has been criticized in the literature as it is well-established that *wasta* negatively impact the economic as argued by Baranik et al. (2023).

However, while on one hand, *wasta* is realized as a positive activity having its contribution in the economic wealth creation of the Middle East, on the other hand it is known for adding to the power circle, and creating barriers for entry for the disadvantaged individuals. This shows the severity of the dilemma of the *wasta* in the region under examination as there are strong proponents that support the *wasta* phenomena and this is rooted in the culture, society and mindset of many people in the Middle East, as per Ali and Weir (2020). As a result, significant effort is needed in order to fight *wasta*, and research such as the current work would be a big step in the right direction to assist human resources department in those organizations to control *wasta* and eventually sustain the organization growth and improve the quality of services offered by the tourism sector.

Yet, the concept of *wasta* in the Mideast region is not considered as any corruptive practice by many organizations' managers in the Middle east, but rather they consider it as forms an integral part of the corporate culture (Talib, 2017). Thus, a significantly large number of individuals across the Middle East are found to be indulging in making use of their close connections to get jobs, or to navigate their careers as such practices are not considered as corrupt activities by their own mindset and understanding (Baranik et al., 2023). In the previous study, the authors investigated the relation among *wasta*, employment status and income in the Middle Eastern countries. They conducted a survey on 5622 participants across five countries in the Middle East and they concluded that there is a direct relation between *wasta* and employees' success in their career regardless of the qualifications of the participants as reported by Baranik et al. (2023).

Alsarhan and Valax (2021) argued that a lot of effort should be carried out to minimize the *wasta* activities in the workplace across the world, which shows the severity of the *wasta* problem. Loewe et al. (2007) summarized the causes for the widespread of *wasta* in Jordanian organizations as follows:

Low awareness: People in Jordan are unaware of the fact things have changed in Jordan over the recent years and they no longer need *wasta* to get a job or promotion. However, they understand the consequences of using *wasta*.

Perverse incentives: Many people in Jordan use *wasta* mainly because all others do the same. Therefore, in their mind is that they cannot progress in their work or get a new job without using *wasta*, which makes the people in Jordan have no incentive to fight *wasta* in the workplace.

Socio-cultural values and norms: The third reason for widespread *wasta* phenomena in Jordan is that *wasta* is deeply rooted in the culture in Jordan for decades as something that goes from one generation to another. People who involve in *wasta* activities in Jordan they associate *wasta* in loyalty, which is actually not a clear link as described by Loewe et al. (2007). However, one can see this justification makes *wasta* acceptable in the Jordan community as it is based on helping other people, which is something good in all cultures over the world.

Resistance to change: The final cause proposed by Loewe et al. (2007) for widespread of *wasta* among Jordanian people is that

the administration structure in Jordan in general contribute to persistence of *wasta* as this will generate a personal gain for administration official officers, which on the other hand makes them more reluctant to prevent *wasta* in the first place. This close loop of administration benefits has direct influence in increasing *wasta* in Jordan as claimed by Loewe et al. (2007).

All these reasons for persistence of *wasta* can be applied to some extent to most Middle eastern societies. Despite this dilemma of *wasta* and its widespread in the existing cultures of the region, the solution is possible and the light at the end of the tunnel can be reached. In short, *wasta* as a social phenomenon exists in most countries around the world with different names and practices. However, the problem lies within the culture and mindset in the Middle Eastern societies, where *wasta* is always considered a positive practice. At the time being, it is rare that the *wasta* to be considered as a corrupt act in the Middle Eastern countries. This can be explained by the fact that there are huge cultural differences between countries across the globe.

Theoretical background on *Wasta*

It is clear from the literature of *wasta* is that researchers started study *wasta* since the 1990s. However, the impacts of *wasta* on business have been only explored in the past decade or so. Table 2 shows key research papers about *wasta* from the business and management literature. As can be noted from Table 2, the main emphasis of the studies in the literature is on the relation between *wasta* and organizations.

Kropf and Newbury-Smith (2016) carried out a literature-base study on *Wasta* in Arabic region. They concluded that *wasta* is form of professional networking and it overlap with social capital. Alwerthan et al. (2018) investigated *wasta* from Psychology lens in Saudi Arabia. They provide many definitions for *wasta* as follows:

- *Wasta* can be seen as a synonym to favoritism among family and friends,
- *Wasta* can be defined as a way of displaying loyalty to your connections,
- On the other hand, *wasta* is a form of corruption in the region under study.

The connection between interpersonal relationships and business practices was investigated by Velez-Calle et al. (2015). The prior work studied stated that *wasta* is same as the *guanxi* phenomena in China and both are same as *compadrazgo* in South America. This shows that *wasta* activities is not limited to the borders of the countries and it is almost all over the world. However, the previous study is only limited the region that has been investigated. The phenomena of *wasta* in in Saudi Arabia was studied by Thursfield et al. (2017). Their work was an early works in Saudi Arabia to establish the relation between *wasta* and employees' success in the workplace. The previous study showed that the local employees of foreign company working in Saudi Arabia began to reject *wasta* practices as they worked for long time in these foreign companies, as per Thursfield et al. (2017). Tlais and Kauser (2011) carried out a detailed study to investigate the role *wasta* could play in career progression at management level. Their work also managed to show the similarities and differences between *wasta* and networking. The outcomes of their work showed that although there is common understanding about the negative outcomes of *wasta*, it is still a traditional that highly affect the both individual and business and is probably to continue at least in short term (Tlais and Kauser, 2011).

Alsarhan and Valax (2021) studied *wasta* in a detailed and highlighted the role of human resource management. The prior

Table 2 Summary of Studies of Wasta from Business and Management Perspective.

Research articles	Methodology	Primary conclusion
Kropf and Newbury-Smith (2016)	Literature orientation	Wasta is quite harmful to all societies and must be avoided.
Alwerthan et al. (2018)	Quantitative research	Establishing a clear connection between <i>wasta</i> and basic human needs.
Velez-Calle et al. (2015)	Literature orientation	Establishing the similarities between <i>wasta</i> and similar activities in other countries worldwide.
Thursfield et al. (2017)	Qualitative research	Developed a link between <i>wasta</i> and cultural aspects in KSA.
Tlaiss and Kauser (2011)	Mixed research	Comparing <i>wasta</i> to networking in the workplace.
Alsarhan and Valax (2021)	Qualitative research	Developed an inverse relation between <i>wasta</i> and the organizations' success. For example, <i>wasta</i> could lead to lower motivation among staff, low morale, reduced job involvement, tension in business environment, bad reputation, and low productivity.
Berger et al. (2015)	Quantitative research	Studied the different types of <i>wasta</i> .
Aldossari and Robertson (2016)	Case study	<i>Wasta</i> could be highlighted related to situation, which create different perception about <i>wasta</i> in the same society.
Al-Ma'aitah et al. (2021)	Quantitative research	<i>Wasta</i> could help in establishing a long business relation.
Khakhar and Rammal (2013)	Qualitative research	Highlighted a situation where international managers who interesting in working in the Mideast use <i>wasta</i> during negotiation stage with local manager
Shaalán et al. (2021)	Quantitative research	Concluded that <i>wasta</i> can help in attracting new customers but it has little to no effect on existing customers

Source: Own work

study reviewed the negative impacts that *wasta* could create in any workplace. Their work showed the complexity of *wasta* in business environment and its effect on the overall performance of organization in the Mideast region. Their findings suggested that there is an inverse relation between *wasta* and the organizations' success. For example, *wasta* could lead to lower motivation among staff, low morale, reduced job involvement, tension in business environment, bad reputation, low productivity, which at the end result in turnover among staff and eventually the organization would be out of the market. However, the work of by Alsarhan and Valax (2021) is limited to quite a small sample, thus a larger sample is needed to fully generalize their work. The role of *wasta* and its effect on the business development in the Mideast countries was studied by Berger et al. (2015), who was aiming to develop a model explaining the phenomena of *wasta* in the region. They concluded that there is an urgent need for conduction studies on *wasta* components and how it is operated in the real practice in the region under study.

In 2016, Aldossari and Robertson explored the *wasta* phenomena in KSA from psychological standpoint. They focused mainly on *wasta* from a cultural perspective, which is quite useful in understanding *wasta* in the region under investigation. Although they suggested many practical implications to their work, it is clear that their work is only limited to one country. In 2021, Al-Ma'aitah et al. conducted an investigation to study the relation between *wasta* and organizations' supply chain. They highlighted that *wasta* could damage the supply chain for any organization. Their findings were based on a large sample about 650 of suppliers in Jordan and they concluded that *wasta* has negative consequences on long-term buyer-supplier relationship in Jordan (Al-Ma'aitah et al. 2021). Also, Khakhar and Rammal (2013) conducted a study to investigate the situation where international managers who interesting in working in the Mideast region use *wasta* during negotiation stage with local manager. The findings of their research showed the importance of *wasta* even during early time of the project. However, their work is mainly focused on a limited number of Lebanese firms. Therefore, their findings should be used with a care when it comes to other countries in the region.

The role of *wasta* and Arab networking was examined by Shaalan et al. (2021), who showed how *wasta* can help organizations to success in keeping their staff for long time. They gathered data from 305 customers from different Egyptian firms

(Shaalán et al., 2021). They concluded that *wasta* can help in attracting new customers but it has little to no effect on existing customers. In addition, *wasta* plays central role in increasing the customer loyalty. The work of Shaalan et al. (2021) was an early attempt to develop a comprehensive model about *wasta*. However, their model has its own limitations when applying it to another counter. In 2013, Barnett et al. developed a model for simple economics of "*wasta*" focusing mainly on the Mideast region. They highlighted that despite being around for long time in each and every business, *wasta* is kind of overlooked in the literature by many authors. They concluded that although *wasta* has impact on each society in terms of economic consequences, *wasta* is not yet fully studied and investigated. As a result, it is important to highlight the importance of moral to minimize *wasta* activities. To encourage moral inside the organization, it is critical to lead by example and establishing clear reward and incentives system. It is essential to mention that morality could assist managers to effectively manage *wasta*.

The literature-base (i.e., Literature review) was used only by three studies, namely Barnett et al. (2013), Kropf and Newbury-Smith (2016), and Velez-Calle et al. (2015). In contrast, the Qualitative research method has been adopted by eight research papers, which are Thursfield et al. (2017), Alsarhan and Valax (2021), Berger et al. (2015), Aldossari and Robertson (2016), Al-Ma'aitah et al. (2021), Khakhar and Rammal (2013). This shows that Qualitative research method is the most popular method in the existing literature. Moreover, the only study that has been reported to use Empirical—quantitative research method, which was Alwerthan et al. (2018), while Tlaiss and Kauser (2011) was the only research paper in the existing literature to use both Quantitative and Qualitative research method in the same study in the field of *wasta* in the Middle East as presented in Table 2. This table shows the work of 11 research papers in the existing literature of *wasta* in the Middle East, which is in line with Abosag and Ghauri (2022).

Impact of wasta on employees and organizations

Generally, the use of *wasta* has become a significant concern that must be dealt with in an urgent way as it results in excluding talents and competencies from the organization. *Wasta* relies heavily on networking on one side, but it does great harm to efficiency and social justice. Alwerthan et al. (2018) argued that

corruption is prohibited in all Middle Eastern societies, *wasta* on the other hand can be described as a social bribery, although *wasta* is not criminalized not in the Middle east and even not in most countries around the world because it is paid for nothing. Alwerthan et al. (2018) also claims that *wasta* create kind of social inequality between people who use *wasta* and people who unlucky to use *wasta*.

The above discussion highlights the effect of *wasta* on the business environment. However, to fully understand the complexity of such phenomena as *wasta*, it is important to evaluate the employees' perception. Al-thbah (2021) conducted an extensive survey about *wasta* in Qatar. The prior survey was distributed to above one thousand participants in the country under study. It is interesting to note that the prior survey asked the participants to compare *wasta* and hard work and which of one of them could lead to career's success. They stated the question as "What helps most to bring success: hard work, or luck and *wasta*?". Interestingly, about 45% sated that *wasta* could lead to more success compared to hard working, which is completely the opposite perception to European and Asian people who evaluate hard working more than networking and *wasta*, according to Al-thbah (2021). However, these results of Al-thbah (2021) are only limited to Qatar and care should be taken when generalizing these findings to other countries in the region.

An important point to highlight is that practice of *wasta* in the Mideast region under investigation makes business relations inefficient and unfair. As a result, this environment with a high level of *wasta* would make it difficult for international companies to work in the Middle East. Although it is well-known the importance of the Middle East market for global economic, there is still lack of knowledge about the cultural norms in this emerging region, which creates a lot of difficulties for foreign business who wants to operate in the Middle East. By elucidating the intricate implications of *wasta* within this specific context, this study endeavors to bridge a crucial gap in the existing literature. The recognition of how *wasta* hampers business relations and impacts HRM practices accentuates the need for deeper insights into this complex phenomenon. This research holds promise for enhancing the knowledge base concerning the dynamics of *wasta* and its interplay with business practices, thereby contributing to the comprehension of cultural norms and aiding foreign companies in navigating this challenging landscape. In addition, it is clear that all aspects of HRM relies on *wasta* to some extent. The impacts of *wasta* on the in the tourism sector in the Middle East can be summarized as follows:

- Unequal access to public services due the interactions between business people.
- Investors waste thrift time on *wasta* and network reaction instead of focusing on productivity and their business goals.
- *Wasta* represent an additional cost to businesses working in the tourism sector in the Middle East as they invest in building *wasta* relations.
- *Wasta* also imposes additional risk on business, which discourages people from doing business in the Middle East.
- *Wasta* increase market entry to tourism industry in the Middle East.
- At employees' level, *wasta* may lead to over staffing or low-quality employees.
- It has negative impacts in terms of quality of services and efficiency of providing such services.
- *Wasta* could reduce the investment in the sector.
- *Wasta* leads to inequality by default as some would have privileges while others do not have such privileges.

These significant negative impacts of *wasta* on all aspects in the Middle East constitute a robust motivation for business people to

pursue proper solutions. The discussion in this section is in line with the work of Al-thbah (2021). Considering both sides of arguments about *wasta*, it is fair to argue that *wasta* has more negative impacts than positive impacts. In addition, *wasta* would lead to fewer specialists in the tourism sector in the Middle East.

Current issues in tourism research

While the previous sections have provided an in-depth exploration of *wasta*—a widespread phenomenon in the Middle East affecting business practices—it is essential to acknowledge the existing gaps and challenges in the research, particularly within the specific context of the tourism sector as follows:

- **Limited focus on the tourism sector:** In the introductory section, the significance of *wasta* in the Middle East's organizational culture, especially in business contexts, was highlighted. However, the research on *wasta* tends to be skewed toward general organizational implications, with a noticeable lack of emphasis on its complex dynamics within the tourism sector. As tourism involves numerous stakeholders and unique operational challenges, understanding how *wasta* influences recruitment, teamwork, and overall HRM practices in tourism-related businesses is paramount (Xinli et al., 2022).
- **Lack of sector-specific recommendations:** The literature review presented an overview of studies contributing to the understanding of *wasta*, with a particular focus on its implications for HR practices. However, there is a notable absence of sector-specific recommendations for the tourism industry. To address the challenges posed by *wasta* effectively, tourism organizations need tailored guidelines and best practices that account for the sector's distinct characteristics and stakeholder relationships.
- **Integration of *wasta*-free practices:** Section 4 about the current status of literature review in the tourism research outlined existing studies and their contributions. However, the application of change management strategies for *wasta*-free practices within the tourism sector was underrepresented. Developing strategies that promote fair recruitment, employee development, and community involvement in tourism businesses is essential for creating an ethical and sustainable industry (Vveinhardt and Bendaraviciene, 2022).
- **Cross-cultural variations:** In Section 5, named *Wasta* in the Mideast Region, the diverse cultural landscapes across different countries were acknowledged. While the existing research covers various Middle Eastern nations, the cross-cultural variations of *wasta* and its specific impacts on the tourism industry in each context is needed. Given that tourism heavily relies on cultural exchange, understanding these aspects is crucial for implementing effective management strategies (Noorazem et al., 2021).
- **Ethical considerations in tourism:** The section on the theoretical background on *wasta* – Section 6 – discussed its evolution and the changing perceptions within the Middle East. However, the ethical considerations associated with *wasta* in the tourism sector were not extensively explored. Understanding how leveraging personal connections might affect the perception of tourists, impact destination choices, and compromise the integrity of the tourism experience is pivotal for ensuring ethical business practices in the industry.
- **Long-term effects on tourism development:** While the literature review in the current study touched upon the economic consequences of *wasta*, its long-term effects on tourism development remain largely unexplored.

Table 3 Critical evaluation of *wasta* in the region.

Rationale	Positive Side	Negative Side
Motives	Helping family or friends when they needed help the most.	Someone on the other side will lose for example his or her opportunity to get a job regardless of their qualifications.
Aims	Providing voluntary service for your close circle.	The one who use <i>wasta</i> probably will be less qualified.
Impacts	Helping someone with their career to overcome some barriers.	Someone on the other side will be discriminated.
Means	Kink the person with the key employees inside the organization, recommend someone because of his or her connections.	Not hiring anyone without recommendation, unclear hiring process, unclear promotion inside the organization,
Behavior	Not admitting the impacts of his or hr recommendation.	Understanding the impacts of hie or her actions.

Examining how *wasta* practices may hinder sustainable tourism practices, community engagement, and overall industry growth is crucial for fostering responsible and resilient tourism in the Middle East (Soehari and Budiningsih, 2020).

In short, addressing these issues in future research endeavors will not only enhance our understanding of *wasta*'s specific implications on the tourism sector in the Middle East but also contribute to the development of targeted strategies and policies. These, in turn, will mitigate the negative effects of *wasta* and foster a more transparent, ethical, and wealthy tourism industry in the region.

Managerial Implications for *wasta* in business management

International companies seeking to work business in the Middle East should do their research well, and attempt to establish local connections. The first step for these foreign firms is building trust-based relationships with local companies in the Middle East. Second, experts of business and market should try to integrate *wasta* in their framework. Then they have to admit that despite its importance, *wasta* has been ignored for a long time in the Middle East. Finally, foreign companies should understand the dynamics of *wasta* in the region.

Understanding the complexity of the *wasta* is a critical part for foreign companies to enter to the tourism market in the region under study. It is fair to stated entering the tourism market is possible for those foreign companies for example through third parties who willing to provide such insight to the market. Over time, those foreign companies can build their own networking. The previous approach would result in substantial enhancement in the ability those foreign companies to work and do business in the region under study regales of high level of *wasta*. One way of doing so is by establishing a connection with local parties in the region. It is fair to highlight that the main contributors for success of international business in the Middle East is to what extent their able to work and integrate in such high *wasta* business climate in the region.

***Wasta* in business management: critical thoughts.** *Wasta* in the Mideast region can be described as "immutable social phenomenon" as stated by Weir et al. (2019). However, the current work argues that there are clear research gaps in this area under investigation from both side industry and academia standpoints. Engaging in this type of research holds the promise of enriching our comprehension of such intricate phenomena. Moreover, such scholarly exploration and discourse could yield substantial advantages for foreign enterprises aiming to penetrate new markets within the region. This endeavor strives to address a pivotal gap in the existing literature. By delving into the nuanced facets of *wasta*, we aspire to contribute to the existing body of knowledge. Beyond mere theoretical gains, this research has practical implications, potentially guiding international companies towards successful market entry strategies. Thus, this study holds the potential to bridge knowledge gaps, further academic

understanding, and provide tangible guidance for businesses navigating their way to the Middle East market.

For anyone who is related to the Mideastern region, the general perception when it comes to *wasta* is that *wasta* is similar to corruption to some extent. However, throughout this research it is clear that this general perception in reality is far of being true as the phenomena of *wasta* is more complex. Therefore, it is difficult to decide the nature of *wasta* as positive or negative. This could be justified due to the cultural difference in the region under study. All this put more on the complexity of the *wasta* and its role in business environment in the tourism sector in the region.

The typical definition of *wasta* is the use of family or friends' connection to obtain career help. This adds more to the complexity as in one side, *wasta* in business climate such as promoting with merit or obtain a job through connection it is considered illegal. One other side, refusing to engage in *wasta* practice to help your family or friends in many societies in the region is considered as disloyalty to your group. Between these two forces of business and social contract *wasta* flourish every day more and more. Table 3 provide a critical discussion and concluding thoughts about the phenomena of *wasta* in the region under investigation.

As a result, it is important to develop the staff's commitment towards the organization, which will reduce their involvement in such activities. One justification is that as the commitment increase, *wasta* level decrease, which is understandable as committed employee who understand his or her organization's values will not carry out such activities to heme his or her organization. Recently, most organizations all over the world understand the importance of employees in organization's success in the market, thus they paid more attention to their staff. It critical to highlight that staff's commitment is one of the main factors for organization's success.

In addition, there is a strong negative relation between *wasta* and organizational growth particularly in the tourist sector. The behavior of organizations has well investigated and reported in the literature. However, the success factors for organizational behavior and growth varies from one research to another such as the work of Fidelis (2022). This could be explained by the variance in sample selection as well as the difference in the location of the study. For instance, the samples of their research are based on companies from public sector or private sector as this distinguish would make a big difference in terms of results. In addition, the definition of growth varies from one researcher to another. In short, *wasta* is dominated in the tourism sector in the region despite the different perception about it. It is linked to the organization's growth as it has negative impact on this growth. It is clear that there is an urgent need to develop solution of this harmful activities, which will be attempted in the following section.

Conceptual framework development for *Wasta*-free management

Despite the development in indicators for corruption, there are many limitations associated with these indices, according to Loewe et al. (2007). First, all these indices are subjective in nature

as still there is no one universal index to measure corruption or *wasta*. In addition, these indices do not measure corruption as an absolute value, which means these indices only rely on comparison and they do not consider the intensity of corruption. They just highlight whether corruption is more or less widespread in one organization compared to other organizations. On top of that, these corruption indicators provide little or no information at all about the phenomena of *wasta* in business settings because they do not differentiate between different forms of corruption, as per Loewe et al. (2007). However, the outcomes of the previous research should be treated with care as they only interviewed quite a small sample of the population in Jordan, which means the samples are not representative.

The proposed conceptual framework for Wasta-free management is precisely developed from both the extensive discussions presented in this paper and the comprehensive insights gathered from the existing literature. The proposed framework consists of 11 steps and it is in line with the work of Alsarhan and Valax (2021):

1. *Initiation*: The current status of *wasta* in the tourism area in the Mideast region should be established along with the required changes. This as two sides of the same coin: admitting the present reality and the potential outcomes of changes on the other side.
2. *Assessing the environment for modification*: It explains the nature of organizations in the Middle East; the operation process for organizations in a region full with *wasta*.
3. *Planning for change*: A clear plan for change is developed to show the main purpose for change and the roles and responsibilities for all parties involved in the change. An example of a change plan would be developing a merit-based HRM structure
4. *Sponsors' support*: The involvement and support from sponsors are critical for success for this change. Sponsors could be for example leaders or policy makers.
5. *Preparing the people for change*: People concerned in this case are mainly staff in the tourism sector in the region and candidates in the same area.
6. *Creating culture to make change last*: Start changing structures, regulations, and laws at both organization level and employees' level, to make the change last.
7. *Imitating leaders for the change*: Leading by example inside the organization is essential for such change.
8. *Wining starts small*: Staff inside the organization need to see early wining signs for such change, which will help the change to last.
9. *Effective communication*: it is clear that effective communication is critical for the success of the change plan. This could be carried out through training, monitoring, coaching and meeting. This helps the change to last as more and more staff would be aware of it and commit to contribute to the success of the change.
10. *Measuring and controlling the change*: For lasting impacts for the change, it is essential to implement a robust monitoring and control process to make sure the effectiveness of the plan and its implementation.
11. *Registering the lessons learned*: Gathering the lessons learned from different organizations working in the Middle East, would help in updating the current framework on a regular basis.

The proposed framework emerges as a structured guide for fostering a Wasta-free organizational environment. It captures key elements identified through critical examination, offering a strategic roadmap for managers and leaders to navigate the challenges associated with informal connections and *wasta* in the workplace.

Recommendations for practice

The significance of the present study lies primarily in its practical implications, particularly within the context of the Middle East's tourism sector. One notable aspect is the evident void pertaining to anti-*wasta* strategies within the region. While recent endeavors have been made to establish measures through regulatory frameworks, these initiatives have exhibited limited effectiveness due to their partial coverage, omitting key stakeholders such as internal organizational staff.

The current research takes on the responsibility of addressing and complementing these ongoing efforts. By shedding the lights on this critical aspect, the current study aims to enhance the existing anti-*wasta* strategies. This endeavor bridges a critical gap in the literature, signifying the potential to offer practical solutions that encompass all relevant components, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive and effective anti-*wasta* framework.

Throughout the present study, there is a clear agreement that to minimize *wasta* in business environment, any types of favoritisms should be avoided at all levels inside the organizations. In addition, the significance of the current work lies on providing potential solutions for HRM practices regarding hiring and training. Another important contribution is for HRM by highlighting the warning signs for employees may involve in corruption, human resource department develop additional efficiency, in addition, applying these kinds of proposed solutions would increase the organization's competitiveness. Moreover, reducing corruption inside the organization will increase the employees' commitment, leading to higher production rate and better organizational growth. These outcomes in the present study are in line with the study of Ramady (2016).

It is recommended for practice that for short-term committing to anti-*wasta* regulations would result in reduced *wasta* level in the tourism sector. In addition, audits have an important role to play when it comes to fighting *wasta* in the region. The following procedures are suitable for long run:

- Education that is based on merit and equality is critical for eliminating *wasta* in the region. This will help in establishing sense of equality and encourage HRM to hire based only on merit, skills, ability and qualifications of the candidates.
- When it comes to hiring, it is critical to pay attention to the candidates' morals, personal beliefs, ethical and loyalty background.
- HRM should work hard to maintain all employees' commitment towards the organization as well as developing training for anti-*wasta* and keeping employees satisfied would reduce the probability of employees engaging in such activities.

The current study is an attempt to provide a solution for the tourism industry in the Middle East based on a detailed steps in the direction of limiting the *wasta* activities in all companies working in the Middle East. This movement would lead to *wasta*-free business climate in the region. The proposed solutions and discussion present the basis for all involved parties to work towards eliminating *wasta* in the region. The proposed framework could be the foundation of more work to come in this area in the future. In addition, the proposed solution could be implemented by any organization individually or collectively by all organization in the sector as organization is the first defense line against *wasta*.

To sum up, a good business climate in the tourism sector in the Middle East is critical for the success; and the control of *wasta* is one of its core dimensions. Business leaders in the tourism sector and academic researchers in the Middle East must better

understand how *Wasta* is work in practice, and the current study is a step in this direction.

Contribution to the literature

This study aims to make a clear contribution to the existing literature by addressing fundamental research questions, bringing fresh insights into the complex phenomenon of *wasta* in the Middle East, particularly within the dynamic environment of the tourism sector. The anticipated contributions are outlined below:

- **Sector-specific impact on business management:** The present study offered an exploration of how *wasta* uniquely influences various dimensions of business management, zooming in on the tourism sector. By investigating its repercussions on broader HRM practices, the research aims to bridge the existing gap in sector-specific implications, providing targeted insights for tourism-related businesses.
- **Contextualizing *wasta* in tourism:** This study investigated how *wasta* operates within the tourism sector, acknowledging the diverse stakeholders involved and the unique challenges faced by businesses in this domain. The insights generated aim to enrich the understanding of *wasta*'s implications in a tourism context.
- **Practical implications for businesses:** Beyond academic contributions, the study aims to provide practical insights for businesses operating in the tourism sector. By understanding the cultural, ethical, and managerial dimensions of *wasta*, organizations can develop strategies to navigate this phenomenon ethically and effectively, contributing to improved organizational performance and sustainable business practices.
- **The conceptual framework development:** The framework developed by the current papers stands as a strong foundation for developing and implementing effective strategies in *Wasta*-free management. It serves as a bridge between theoretical understanding and practical application, providing a cohesive structure that aligns with the objectives outlined in the preceding sections of this paper.

Conclusion

Wasta exists in everyday life in most if not all societies in the Middle East. Indeed, as some researchers argued that “*Wasta* has become a right and expectation these days” in most Middle Eastern countries. It has become irreplaceable and invincible across organizations in the Middle East. The current study provides in depth discussion and evaluation of *wasta* phenomena in the tourism area in the region. The present study highlighted the root causes of *wasta* and its consequences on the region development. This research aspires to enrich the current literature on *wasta* by offering a detailed exploration of its sector-specific impacts, and the cultural and ethical considerations that surround it. Through these contributions, the study aims to advance our understanding of *wasta* in the Middle East, particularly in the context of the tourism industry, and provide valuable insights for both academics and practitioners. However, more work is required to fully establish this trend.

While the current paper has made strides in bridging gaps and shedding light on the concept of *wasta*, a pressing need remains to comprehensively explore all sides of *wasta* from diverse perspectives. Consequently, future research endeavors about *wasta* should take into account the following points to ensure a more holistic understanding of this phenomenon:

- A closer investigation for *wasta* in the tourism sector in the Mideast region will be hugely beneficial as the current literature emphasis only on the *wasta* from general perspectives.

- The current trend of investigation of *wasta* is mainly focused on negative impacts of *wasta*. More detailed studies on both sides of arguments: positive and negative would be greatly beneficial for the tourism industry in the Middle East. The current work already started working in the direction, however future research based on experimental evidence is still needed.
- Although the entry of foreign companies to the tourism market in the Middle East is possible as highlighted by the current work, the degree of success of these foreign companies to manage o secure *wasta* through local partners is still unclear. Therefore, future research is needed to explore this area in detail.

Building on the current study's findings and contributions, there are several ways for future research that can further enrich the understanding of *wasta* in the Middle East, particularly within the context of the tourism sector:

- **Longitudinal studies:** Undertake longitudinal studies to track the evolution of *wasta* over an extended period. This approach can capture changes in perceptions, societal attitudes, and the effectiveness of any interventions aimed at mitigating the negative consequences of *wasta* in the tourism sector.
- **Intervention strategies:** Design and evaluate intervention strategies aimed at minimizing the negative effects of *wasta* in tourism businesses. Implement and assess the effectiveness of policies, training programs, and ethical guidelines. Identifying practical, actionable interventions can contribute to fostering a more transparent and fair business environment.
- **Technological interventions:** Explore the role of technology in mitigating the influence of *wasta*. Investigate how digital platforms, online recruitment systems, and other technological advancements can contribute to a more merit-based recruitment process, reducing the reliance on personal connections in the tourism sector.

It cannot be argued that *wasta* is exclusive to the Middle Eastern countries as there are several activities in different nations which resemble *wasta* to great extent. In addition, *wasta* in the tourism sector in the Middle East is related with social relations, and it effects working conditions in business situations and social environment. An avenue for future research could involve qualitative studies aimed at attaining a deeper comprehension of the *wasta* phenomenon within the Middle Eastern tourism sector. This approach could encompass conducting interviews with individuals possessing extensive expertise in the tourism sector in the Middle East, which will be conducted by the author and published in a subsequent paper.

Data availability

All data used, analyzed or generated are provided within the main text of the research. Therefore, data sharing was not required for this study.

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Author contributions

All the work in this study was conducted by the author, Shaikha Khalfan. Specifically, Shaikha conceptualized the study, obtained the data, conducted the data analysis, and drafted the paper. Additionally, Shaikha carried out the interpretation of results and finalized the formation and compilation of the conclusion.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical approval

The author confirm that the study complies with the highest ethical as laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments. All procedures performed in this study were in line with ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with APA guidelines and comparable ethical standards. No animal participation was needed in this study.

Informed consent


Informed consent was not required as the study did not involve human participants.

Additional information

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