

There is no Escaping the System

I don't like wasta. This is a malfunctioning here; this is what blows up our country on all levels, it goes from small to big. This is one feature of the missing justice. Things that are your right shouldn't demand wasta.

[author's interview with a mayor of a town in South Lebanon, 25 June 2013]

Ethnographic research is all about seeing the systems one seeks to understand from the inside out. It is about maintaining a balance between being part of such systems and being able to scrutinize them from an outsider's perspective. Ideally, one sees the system from an inside perspective without becoming a part of it, but this might very well be an inherently impossible task. These textbook guidelines are becoming tangible dilemmas throughout my fieldwork as it is becoming more clear how the subject of my research is shaping the way I conduct my research. The systems I seek to analyze are the same systems I have to navigate to generate my data, especially because my research explicitly focuses on the connections, relations and networks that constitute the interaction between Palestinian and Lebanese governance actors. In order to get information on and from these actors and their interactions, I am subjected to the same institutions and logics as they are: if my time in Shabriha so far has taught me one thing about fieldwork methods it is that you cannot swim against the current, but have to go with the flow.

In my case, these dynamics – that the essence of *what* I research becomes apparent in *how* I am made to research it – manifest themselves in many ways. Perhaps the most illustrative is the informal and personal nature of governance interactions. One of my main, if perhaps not particularly surprising, findings is that relations between local Palestinian and Lebanese authorities in Shabriha are overwhelmingly informal – in stark contrast to the (at least at first glance) formalized bureaucracy I am used to in the Netherlands. Even when representing a specific institution, people meet in a personal capacity. They meet in their homes; call each other on their personal mobile number; contact one another via relatives; and discuss a wide array of personal issues as a prelude to most governance business; a separation between working hours and free time is illusory.

The principle mechanism that bridges the personal and the official – often acquired through personal relations and utilized to get official institutions to work for you – is what people here call '[wasta](#).' The term is omnipresent – albeit more in daily life jokes and comments than in my interviews – and infamously hard to translate. It refers to 'connections' that are used to 'facilitate' things. My interpreter explained wasta as indicating the institutionally beneficial nature of a specific relationship; wasta is the social capital needed to 'get things done' (not to earn money or make friends) and is therefore essentially political rather than social or economic (insofar as it is desirable to separate such concepts). Wasta can have positive and

negative connotations (see the opening quote above) and comes in many degrees and forms. People can have a limited or specified wasta – an uncle in the municipal administration; an old class mate in the airport security – or they can have what is called ‘waasel,’ elaborate wasta that reaches the highest levels – a network that allows them to call upon wasta in any situation and regarding any issue, whether it concerns the influencing of personal application procedures, the phrasing of national legal decrees or ‘squeezing the eyes’ of policemen.

Whether seen as moral corruption or research progress, I have been gradually finding my way into the wasta system. Initially, I looked up office numbers on websites (if they even existed, of course) and spent hours calling, being transferred and waiting to be called back by bureaucratic fronts – whether of ministries, parties or NGOs. More and more I have been yielding to the via-via approach. Rather than call the secretary of a specific local leader I wanted to talk to, I got his mobile number via an uncle of a friend who had worked with him some years back (lesson number one in Lebanon: ‘never ever throw away a phone number, it can save your life’). Instead of calling an MP myself, I would ask several other people who allegedly knew him well to call him on my behalf. All strategies that are infinitely more efficient and tried and perfected by the very people I research.

All this is not to say that, being the social capital it is, wasta is not structurally and purposefully being overestimated; often it is not the actual wasta you have that generates political power, but the wasta people think you have. Moreover, assumed wasta can easily backfire. I was convinced I could not approach a certain political figure directly and had someone else request a meeting on my behalf. When I grew impatient after a month and decided to give him a call after all, we met and he later confessed that he actually disliked the guy I had considered as my wasta and had refused to meet me because of this.

Another key concern is the moral connotations that come with the term wasta, which in ‘the West’ is often associated with nepotism, corruption, cronyism and a whole bunch of other rather unflattering denominators. The difference between wasta and ‘networking,’ which has a substantially more professional ring to it, might be a matter of degree rather than nature. Indeed, adhering to wasta might be little more than what social scientists like to call ‘snowball sampling,’ another considerably more accepted term. As [Edward Said](#) has taught us, specifying the interests and power dynamics underlying the tendency to distinguish between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ public life in the west and the east, is critical and touches upon both ethics and reflexivity.

Ethically, the (moral) differentiation between (eastern) research subject and (western) research object is a crucial ingredient in the legitimation of research for the sake of research, as painfully illustrated by a Palestinian ‘fixer’ in his article [Palestinian Refugees are not at Your Service](#). In terms of methodological reflection, it is significant that as a researcher I do not merely use wasta, but I am also being used as wasta. People in Shabriha know that many institutions are more accessible to me than they are to them. Several meetings – particularly with national organizations – were denied when they were telephonically requested by my interpreter in Arabic only to be granted when I called and informed in English. I have received countless requests to talk with people in the Dutch Embassy to help with visa

applications; to establish contacts with Dutch companies to set up business ties; to liaise with humanitarian organizations to make sure people were included in distributions. Political figures have repeatedly tried to politically enroll me to benefit from my (of course non-existent) relations with the Dutch embassy, donors and companies. This, moreover, extends to my interpreter, who gets both requests to act as wasta towards me ('please ask her if I can work for her organization and tell her I speak English fluently') or gets offered wasta because of me ('if you need anything from the UN, I know a person working there who can help you').

Also, being the outsider is relative. People in Shabriha – despite their warm acknowledgement that it feels as if I have been living with them for years rather than months – no doubt still see me as the *azjnabiye*. But a friend from another region in Lebanon told me I no longer sounded like an (objective) outsider. We were discussing the [recent clashes](#) between a (Sunni) firebrand cleric and the army (aided by (Shia) Hezbollah militants) in the city of Saida. When I was skeptical about her analysis of the clashes – that initially sounded like a typical conspiracy theory to me, but seemed more credible the more I researched it – and suggested she might hold a slightly partisan view, she retorted that that was what 'those people' – here clearly including me – in the South say. A veritable milestone in my fieldwork.