

The Power of *Wastah* in Lebanese Speech

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"Do you have any *wastah*?" This was the only question that many of my Lebanese friends and relatives asked me when I applied for one of the Chair of Administrative Affairs positions at the Lebanese University in 1972. I replied that I ranked among the top five in the competency exam and they needed to hire at least 10 people, so why would I need a *wastah*? They simply shrugged and warned, "Wait and you'll see."

To make the story short, I was passed over and more than 10 other people were hired. Every one of those who were hired had some type of *wastah*. I was hired 3 years later only after I had acquired strong *wastah*, which included several influential individuals, among them Suleiman Frangieh, the president of Lebanon at that time.

Much of the research by political theorists and international journalists with regard to the Middle East has focused on the study of Islam, media representations of Arabs, the oil and mineral resources of the Gulf region, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. All these topics have been of great interest to the West. Yet readers remain in the dark as to the significance of the Middle Eastern hierarchy of values and patterns of communication at the heart of any issue in that part of the world.

The complex region of the Middle East is far from a quick study. Its interlocking class, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and family and religious distinctions pose challenges to the researcher who wishes to generalize research findings. However, by examining

the *wastah* phenomenon in Lebanon and how it is practiced, one might be able to shed some light on this very important communicative behavior not only in Lebanon, but also in the rest of the Middle East. This essay addresses the power of *wastah* (i.e., mediation), considered to be one of the most important communication patterns in the Lebanese cultural system. First, the meaning of *wastah* and its usage in various contexts is explained. Second, major factors influencing the use of *wastah* are discussed. Third, the process of how *wastah* works is described.

Meaning and Usage of *Wastah*

Wastah has been the way of life in Lebanon since before it became a republic. The term *wastah* means many things to many Lebanese people, including clout, connections, networking, recommendations, a "go-between" for two parties with different interests, and a type of contraception to prevent pregnancy.

Wastah can be used within various contexts, such as family, clan, government organizations, neighbors, villages, and nations. It is usually necessary to get a job, a wife, a date, a passport, a visa, a car, or any other commodity. It can also resolve conflicts, facilitate government decisions, or solve bureaucratic problems. For instance, I once had to wait 3 hours until I could find an influential person to help me pay the annual tag fee for my car. The common perception in the Arab world, particularly in Lebanon, is that "one does not do for oneself what might better be done by a

friend or a friend's friend" (Ayoub, 1965, cited in Huxley, 1978, p. 5). One example of *wastah* concerns a student who graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in history and sought to continue his education in France. At that time the Lebanese University **only** offered scholarships to graduates with BA degrees in agriculture. However, because the student's uncle was a dean at that university, the student managed to procure the full scholarship he needed.

Major Factors Influencing the Use of *Wastah*

Religion, kinship, *zaimship* (political leadership), and *musayara* (a communication style emphasizing commonalities) are the most interdependent factors that influence the process of *wastah* in Lebanon. Competency is a factor that can be considered only in special situations where kin are not involved.

Religion

In Lebanon, no one exists without a religion. "Religion is not a preference but is a most necessary social identity, regardless of the individual's beliefs" (Farsoun, 1970, p. 294). Unlike Western nations, where the separation of religion and state is the norm, Lebanon has incorporated religion as a legitimate structure into its political system and organizations.

Lebanese people must have their religion stated on their national IDs. For instance, my ID card states that I am a Maronite Christian (a sect of the Catholic faith). My religious affiliation has been a major factor in my getting jobs, as well as a scholarship for PhD study in the United States.

All forms issued by the Lebanese government require a declaration of religion. Because religion is a major factor in employment and political appointments, especially at the highest levels of government, the Lebanese system has been labeled as confessionalism or sectarianism (whereby positions are given primarily on the basis of religious quotas and secondarily on the basis of qualifications). For example, the National Pact (an agreement among various religious sects) states that the Lebanese President must be a Maronite Christian, the **Speaker** of the Parliament a Shiah Muslim, the Prime **Minister** a Sunni Muslim, and so on. A religious balance

in the number of appointees must always be maintained for national security and better relationships among various sects.

The influence of religion on families can be felt in every aspect of their lives, such as birth, death, baptism, confirmation, circumcision, education, courtship, marriage, divorce, the use of contraception, and inheritance. That influence might be more evident in the realm of education, which has always been a private endeavor of the religious communities. Thus, religious sects generally open their own schools to educate their own people. Such practices contribute to closer relations among people of the same sect and stronger feelings of identification with their religions and families.

Although Lebanon established criminal and civil codes modeled after the French legal system, the Lebanese **constitution** and **legal** codes **delegated** family law (known as "personal status" law) to the traditional religious law courts. Marriage, divorce, inheritance, and adoption all fall in the domain of religious courts. These courts are autonomous and separate from the civil court system. For example, until recently no civil marriage was accepted in Lebanon—only religious marriage. Such a legal system has reinforced confessionalism, traditions, the extended family structure, and *wastah*-making.

Lebanon's civil war has been characterized as sectarian partly because of the differences between Christians and Muslims in education, marriage, household patterns, and lifestyles. Because interaction between confessional factions has not taken place within the Lebanese educational systems, people from different religious beliefs have grown farther apart. This has allowed religion to become a powerful influence on the *wastah* process, rendering it even more difficult to hire someone from a religious sect other than one's own.

Kinship

Kinship consists of the extended family structure, which is part and parcel of the overall structure of the nation. The rate of face-to-face interaction among kinpersons amounts to daily contacts with parents and significant kin members. This fact reinforces *wastah*-making and the solidarity of the extended family.

Research findings suggest that the extended family has been the most economically productive unit. Retail and commercial enterprises are always family owned and run by siblings, cousins, and other extended kin. Owners maintain tight control over their business by staffing them with direct relatives, such as brothers, brothers-in-law, and nephews (Farsoun, 1970; Fuller, 1961; Huxley, 1978; Khalaf & Shwayri, 1966; Sayigh, 1962; Williams & Williams, 1965). Thus, ownership and control patterns remain largely patrimonial and nepotistic, leaving much room for *wastah*.

Males are usually preferred over females, especially in key positions. From birth, boys and girls receive different treatment. Boys are favored because they are considered to be capital investments for the future and excellent contributions to the social and cultural prestige of the family. A man with many sons can speak with great authority. The birth of a girl, on the other hand, is considered reprehensible, burdensome, and a potential source of shame to the family. Although women enjoy as much of Lebanese culture as men, social customs always preserve the domination of the male. For instance, a single woman might find it difficult to move away from her family to live by herself and work before marriage, an action that could endanger the reputation of the family. Today many Lebanese women work in teaching, banking, and other professions. However, most of them are pressured to stay home and manage their domestic affairs. Consequently, females need much stronger *wastahs* than males in procuring employment.

Zaimship

Zaimship refers to political leadership that is more often inherited than earned. Today's *zuama* (political leaders) are usually the sons, nephews, or cousins of previous *zuama* from the same extended families. Such families are the structures wherein political functions generally take place.

A Lebanese *zaim* is the descendent of an old feudal lord whose extended family has had a good reputation throughout Lebanese history and whose power is based on inherited estates, extensive businesses, and an important government post. The *zaim* is usually a male member of the parliament who holds a ministry position. He plays a key role as a *wasit* between the government and his constituency.

On the one hand, he tries to preserve his followers' rights and interests in return for political loyalty and support. On the other hand, he represents the government in certain matters related to his constituency. Thus, the *zaim* is an essential *wastah*-maker, a focal point of relations between the government and kinship structures in the nation.

The many different political parties in Lebanon are self-styled factions and alliances of various *zuama* with the most powerful *zaim* at the top. The *zaim*, as Lazerfeld and his colleagues found in the 1940s, does not have direct contact with every person in the **extended family structure**. He uses **informal channels of communication with opinion leaders or heads** of extended families for reasons of trust and loyalty purposes. Because the *zaim* functions as a landlord, an employer, a provider, and a dual representative for both the government and his constituency, he relies heavily on certain members of his extended family to accomplish some of these various functions. Thus, he and family members serve as communication conduits from the government to opinion leaders to each individual. The *zaim*, along with influential family elders, become important *wastah*-makers in hiring kin members as well as solving conflicts between individuals, factions, and subfactions. This fact contributes to the maintenance of a society that remains somewhat dependent on deep-rooted traditions and values that constitute the essence of security for the Lebanese people.

Musayara

Musayara is a communication pattern emphasizing commonalities and relieving differences. More specifically, it is an other-oriented style of interaction aimed to conciliate and maintain harmony in social relations, a "behavior designed to enhance commonalities rather than differences, cooperation rather than conflict, and mutuality rather than self-assertion" (Griefat & Katriel, 1989, p. 123). Griefat and Katriel discuss four dimensions of *musayara*. First, the *musayara* of respect is extended to those who are higher in social status, such as the elderly population, the clergy, and those occupying high government positions. Second, the *musayara* of magnanimity is used when the addressee is in a weaker position, such as in the cases of an elder interacting with a sick

person or a teacher refraining from punishing an insubordinate student. Third, the *musayara* of politics involves the equality or inequality of the interactants and might be associated with the pursuit of one's interests, such as situations where students go out of their way to act with *musayara* toward their teacher to delay a test. Fourth, the *musayara* of conciliation is used in conflict situations. However, performing *musayara* in these situations involves a third party, usually a *wasit*, rather than the disputants themselves. During *musayara* in such a context, the *wasit* tries to appease disputants and thus prevents a conflict from escalating and reaching the government.

Although *musayara* is a preferred style of communication among the elderly, it is not usually favored by young, Western-influenced Lebanese. Although they hold high respect for their elders, they prefer to be more direct in the way they communicate. This is a major reason why a *wasit* is usually a senior citizen who considers *musayara* an important communication vehicle in conflict situations and negotiations. Each party in the conflict is expected to act with *musayara* toward the *wasit* who in turn invites them to act with *musayara* toward each other after he works out some type of conciliation. For Arabs, "life demands *musayara*" (Griefat & Katriel, 1989) and the *wasit* must understand its principles.

How Does the Process of *Wastah* Work?

Wastah is mostly used to find jobs for relatives or close friends and to solve conflicts. The extended family acts as an employment agency by searching for a *wasit* to help get a job, preferably one with high social status in the family. The *wasit* is supposed to be well "wired up," an insider who can make things happen (Hall, 1984). He must also be able to use the language of persuasion (appropriate and effective *musayara*) with the elite of the religious and political groups of the nation.

In conflict situations, the *wasit's* job is to conciliate rather than to judge. Conciliation is intended to lead disputants toward a compromise through mutual concessions, as well as to reestablish their relationship on the basis of mutual respect. The *wasit* tries to talk to each disputant separately, then brings

them together to reach a possible compromise that presumes to save face for everyone involved and their extended families.

Lebanese people prefer mediators from the same family or business, depending on the type and context of the conflict. As Patai (1983) notes, the role of a *wasit* is to create a supportive climate of communication wherein conflicting parties can modify their behaviors. When a conflict is between members from two different clans, however, a *wasit* on each side tries to prevail over his or her own clan members. These mediators then come together to conciliate.

For instance, when a conflict occurred between my father and a man named Tony Ayoub, one elderly person from the Hashem clan and another one from the Ayoub clan came together to mediate and negotiate a possible settlement. Then each of the two met with their clan member to discuss the results of their meeting(s) and what the two believed to be a fair solution. After several private meetings between the two mediators, my father and Tony were asked to personally participate in the final meeting to announce the settlement of the problem. The common ground among mediators of different families is the mutual desire to keep the government out of the clans' affairs as much as possible. Hence, mediators seem better qualified than government agencies to resolve certain conflicts (Huxley, 1978).

Conclusion

Even though Lebanon has been greatly influenced by the West, most Lebanese people's lives are still organized around their religion, extended family, *zuama*, and extensive *musayara*. The extended family remains the basic economic, political, and social unit through which individuals inherit their religion, honor, respect, social class, and cultural identity. Finally, *wastah* has been and will always be a powerful communication tool and a way of life in Lebanon.

The process of *wastah* and how it is practiced does not differ much from the same practice in other Middle Eastern nations or even some Western countries. The world's global village demands a broadly based cultural knowledge about one's own culture and other cultures as well. The Western style of direct communication and the emphasis on status symbol

and professional affiliations are beneficial in many situations. However, they can be even more effective when combined with *musayara* and *wastah*. Likewise, the indirect style of interaction and the emphasis on *musayara* for *wastah*-searching and *wastah*-making in the Middle East, especially in Lebanon, does not always or necessarily thrive at the expense of individualism. The knowledge of these styles and how they are used in various cultures promotes more awareness and understanding of ourselves and others and can consequently lead to more effective intercultural relationships.

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