

Attitudes of Managers in Palestinian Companies Toward Favoritism (Wasta) and Perceived Wasta-Related Distortions in Human Resource Management

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Abstract: Purpose: This study examines human resource (HR) managers' perceptions of wasta in Palestinian companies and its association with perceived wasta-related distortions in promotion, hiring, salary and compensation, and training and development. **Methodology:** A mixed-methods design was used. A 30-item questionnaire was administered to a convenience sample of 201 HR managers from approximately 450 companies contacted, and semi-structured interviews with five HR managers were used to contextualize the survey findings. The quantitative analysis included reliability testing, exploratory principal component analysis, Harman's single-factor test, correlations, simple regression models, and basic regression diagnostics. **Results:** Respondents reported a high perceived wasta climate and high perceived wasta-related distortion across the four HRM domains. The associations were positive and statistically significant in all four models, with promotion showing the strongest association and salary and compensation the lowest. The interviews illustrated the same pattern through themes of merit displacement, eroded trust and morale, insider privilege, and weak accountability. **Conclusion:** The findings suggest that wasta should be understood as a perceptual climate embedded in informal institutional and social-exchange relations, rather than as an isolated HR problem. The study offers exploratory evidence that transparent, documented, and reviewable HR procedures are central to limiting connection-based distortion in Palestinian companies. **Recommendations:** The study recommends formalized merit-based HR procedures, stronger oversight, clearer communication of selection criteria, protected reporting channels, and leadership practices that reinforce ethical and merit-based decision-making. **Keywords:** Informal institutions; Organizational justice; Merit-based employment; Ethical HR governance; Decent work (SDG 8); Palestine.

اتجاهات المدراء في الشركات الفلسطينية نحو المحاباة (الواسطة) والتشوهات المدركة المرتبطة بالواسطة في إدارة الموارد البشرية

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المخلص: الهدف: تبحث هذه الدراسة تصورات مديري الموارد البشرية في الشركات الفلسطينية تجاه مناخ الواسطة وعلاقته بالتشوهات المدركة المرتبطة بالواسطة في الترقية، والتوظيف، والرواتب والتعويضات، والتدريب والتطوير. **المنهجية:** اعتمدت الدراسة منهجا مختلطاً، إذ وزعت استبانة مكونة من 30 فقرة على عينة ميسرة قوامها 201 من مديري الموارد البشرية من نحو 450 شركة جرى التواصل معها، واستخدمت مقابلات شبه مقننة مع خمسة مديري موارد بشرية لتفسير نتائج المسح. وتضمنت التحليلات اختبار الثبات، والتحليل العاملي الاستكشافي، واختبار هارمان للعامل الواحد، والارتباطات، والانحدار الخطي البسيط، وبعض الفحوص التشخيصية الأساسية. **النتائج:** أظهرت النتائج ارتفاعاً في مناخ الواسطة المدرك وفي التشوهات المدركة المرتبطة بالواسطة في مجالات الموارد البشرية الأربعة. وكانت العلاقات موجبة ودالة إحصائياً في النماذج الأربعة، مع ظهور أقوى ارتباط في مجال الترقية وأدناه في مجال الرواتب والتعويضات. كما أوضحت المقابلات موضوعات إزاحة الجدارة، وتآكل الثقة والروح المعنوية، وامتياز المقربين، وضعف المساءلة. **الاستنتاجات:** تشير النتائج إلى ضرورة فهم الواسطة بوصفها مناخاً إدراكياً متجذراً في علاقات اجتماعية ومؤسسية غير رسمية، لا مجرد مشكلة منفردة في إدارة الموارد البشرية. وتقدم الدراسة دليلاً استكشافياً على أهمية الإجراءات الشفافة والموثوقة والقابلة للمراجعة للحد من التشوهات القائمة على العلاقات الشخصية في الشركات الفلسطينية. **التوصيات:** توصي الدراسة برسملة إجراءات الموارد البشرية القائمة على الجدارة، وتعزيز الرقابة، وتوضيح معايير الاختيار، وتوفير قنوات آمنة للإبلاغ، وترسيخ ممارسات قيادية أخلاقية قائمة على الجدارة. **الكلمات المفتاحية:** المؤسسات غير الرسمية، العدالة التنظيمية، التوظيف القائم على الجدارة، حوكمة الموارد البشرية الأخلاقية، العمل اللائق (الهدف الثامن للتنمية المستدامة)، فلسطين.

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1. Introduction

Organizations rarely stand apart from the cultures that surround them; they breathe the same air as the societies in which they are embedded. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, culture informs the vocabulary of management, including the practice of human resource management (Budhwar & Mellahi, 2016). Among the informal forces that accompany organizational life, few are as pervasive, or as contested, as *wasta*, understood here as informal mediation or favoritism through personal connections.

More formally, *wasta* refers to the intervention of a third party, usually someone with influence or authority, in administrative decisions inside companies and institutions for personal gain, often at the expense of efficiency and fairness (Khakhar & Rammal, 2013). It operates as a social mechanism and a system of personal exchange that helps individuals obtain what they desire (Alwerthan et al., 2018). Although *wasta* can sometimes ease transactions and strengthen social ties, it is commonly discussed as a form of favoritism in which some benefit unfairly at the expense of others (Hutchings & Weir, 2006; Megheirkouni & Weir, 2019). Prior work has documented its relevance across Arab societies and in Palestine, including evidence from Palestinian healthcare services (Takruri et al., 2023).

The phenomenon carries a paradox at its heart. *Wasta* bears clearly negative connotations, yet it is widely practiced and openly relied upon. It appears in government, academia, and health services alike (Al-Twal & Cook, 2022). In contexts marked by corruption, cumbersome procedures, and weak accountability, individuals turn to their connections to secure what they need, to advance their goals, and sometimes simply to protect rights that should have been guaranteed (Al-Twal & Aladwan, 2021; Alsarhan & Al-Twal, 2023; Horak et al., 2020). This helps explain the contradiction in how people judge *wasta*: they condemn it in principle while using it in practice (Aldossari & Robertson, 2016).

Seen through an HR lens, *wasta* operates as a kind of currency. People draw on it to secure a job, a favourable appraisal, or a promotion (Alsarhan & Valax, 2021). When it enters recruitment or

advancement, competence and experience are perceived to be set aside in favour of kinship and acquaintance, and other employees may feel wronged, disengage, and eventually leave (Al-Twal & Cook, 2022; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011). Like most informal institutions, *wasta* is associated with both a dark and a bright side: its dark side appears in perceptions of distorted decisions about hiring, promotion, and retention and in the sense of injustice these breed (Barnett et al., 2013), while its bright side can lower the cost of slow bureaucracy, ease the exchange of information, and support workplace relationships (Loewe et al., 2008; Weir et al., 2016). Either way, it leaves a deep imprint on individuals and organizations alike (Alsarhan, 2021).

Yet for all this attention, scholarship on *wasta* remains fragmented and short on theoretical precision, leaving the complexity of the phenomenon and its organizational correlates only partly understood (Al-Twal, 2021; Ali & Weir, 2020). Empirical evidence has been especially visible in studies of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, and wider Middle Eastern management contexts (Al-Twal & Aladwan, 2021; Aldossari & Robertson, 2016; Alsarhan & Valax, 2021; Loewe et al., 2008; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011), while Palestine has received more limited systematic attention, mostly outside private-sector HRM (Takruri et al., 2023). This gap matters because Palestine combines institutional fragility, political and economic uncertainty, dense social networks, and a constrained labour market, conditions under which informal influence may become especially salient in HRM decisions.

Against this backdrop, the present study addresses a specific gap: the absence of integrated, theoretically grounded, evidence-based analysis of how a perceived *wasta* climate relates to distinct HR functions in Palestinian companies, as seen through the eyes of the HR managers who administer them. Guided by the central question, how is a perceived *wasta* climate associated with perceived *wasta*-related distortions in human resource management in Palestinian companies? it pursues four aims: to gauge HR managers' attitudes toward *wasta*, and to examine its association with perceived *wasta*-related distortion in promotion, hiring, salary and compensation, and training and development. By

combining descriptive, quantitative, and qualitative evidence within an explicit theoretical frame, the study moves beyond documenting that *wasta* is problematic toward describing and interpreting where the associations are strongest.

The contribution is therefore not only geographical (Abdeljawad & Bahlaq, 2023; Abu Alia et al., 2024; Hassounah et al., 2026). Scientifically, the study uses the Palestinian setting to examine how a general perceived *wasta* climate is associated with perceived *wasta*-related distortions across several HRM domains, thereby connecting informal institutional theory, organizational justice, social exchange, and social capital perspectives within one empirical model. Practically, it points to concrete safeguards for HR managers, company leaders, and policy actors seeking to make recruitment, promotion, rewards, and development opportunities more transparent, documented, and reviewable.

2. Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development

Before turning to theory, two constructs require definition. Favoritism (*wasta*) is understood here as the use of personal and social relationships to secure special interests, whether in employment, services, or privileges (Aldossari & Robertson, 2016). In this study, the independent construct is a general perceived *wasta* climate, meaning the extent to which HR managers perceive informal favoritism as present in organizational life. The four dependent constructs are not objective HR decisions; they are perceived *wasta*-related distortions in promotion, hiring, salary and compensation, and training and development. This distinction is conceptually important but necessarily close, because the study investigates perceptions of a socially embedded practice. The empirical results are therefore interpreted as associations among related perceptual constructs rather than as causal evidence about objective HR outcomes.

Because *wasta* sits at the intersection of relationship, reward, and rule, no single theory captures it fully. This study therefore reads the phenomenon through four complementary lenses that together help explain why a *wasta* climate persists, how employees experience it, and why it is

associated with problematic HR outcomes. At its foundation, *wasta* is an exchange relationship. Social exchange theory holds that social life unfolds as a series of interdependent transactions governed by norms of reciprocity, in which favours granted create diffuse obligations to reciprocate over time (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). *Wasta* is such a system of favour-for-favour exchange, mediated by an intermediary whose social standing underwrites the obligation (Hutchings & Weir, 2006; Smith et al., 2012). Within the firm, this exchange coexists with the formal employment exchange between organization and employee; where reward is perceived to track connection rather than contribution, the implicit promise that effort will be recognized is perceived as broken and the psychological contract as breached (Aldossari & Robertson, 2016), a pattern associated with reduced trust and discretionary effort.

If social exchange explains *wasta*'s logic, organizational justice theory helps explain its felt cost. Justice research distinguishes three interlocking perceptions: distributive justice, the fairness of outcomes; procedural justice, the fairness of the processes that produce them; and interactional justice, the fairness of interpersonal treatment (Adams, 1965; Colquitt, 2001; Greenberg, 1990). A perceived *wasta* climate is associated with perceptions of reduced justice on all three dimensions at once: outcomes seen as allocated by connection rather than contribution, procedures seen as bypassed, and interpersonal treatment seen as signalling to the unconnected that their dignity and effort count for less. Justice theory is therefore consistent with the demoralization, distrust, and disengagement this study observes among those outside the network.

Wasta is also a resource. Social capital theory conceives of the goodwill, information, and influence embedded in networks of relationships as a genuine form of capital that individuals mobilize for advantage (Bourdieu, 1986; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). This lens illuminates *wasta*'s celebrated bright side, its capacity to speed information and ease transactions (Loewe et al., 2008), yet it equally exposes the dark side: *wasta* is a form of bonding social capital that privileges the in-group and excludes outsiders, elevating particularism over the universalism that merit-

based HR systems require, and so turning a private asset into a collective liability. Finally, *wasta* is a rule, albeit an unwritten one. Institutional theory defines informal institutions as socially shared rules, created and enforced outside official channels (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; North, 1990). Where formal institutions are weak, informal ones fill the vacuum, and *wasta* functions as a competing informal institution that substitutes personal networks for transparent, accountable procedure (Barnett et al., 2013; Minbaeva et al., 2023), which helps explain both its self-reinforcing persistence and its pronounced presence in fragile settings such as Palestine.

2.1 Hypothesis Development

Taken together, the four lenses converge on a single expectation. The study's model posits that a general perceived *wasta* climate is associated with perceived *wasta*-related distortions in four HRM domains: promotion, hiring, salary and compensation, and training and development. Operating as a reciprocity-based exchange and a network resource that, in the absence of strong formal rules, is experienced as injustice, a stronger perceived *wasta* climate should be positively associated with greater perceived distortion across every domain. The four lenses give no strong prior ranking among the domains; because *wasta* can operate both at entry, through hiring, and in the internal allocation of promotions, pay, and training, positive associations are expected across all four, of broadly comparable magnitude (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011). These considerations yield four directional hypotheses:

H1. Perceived *wasta* climate is positively associated with perceived *wasta*-related distortion in promotion decisions in Palestinian companies.

H2. Perceived *wasta* climate is positively associated with perceived *wasta*-related distortion in hiring decisions in Palestinian companies.

H3. Perceived *wasta* climate is positively associated with perceived *wasta*-related distortion in salary and compensation decisions in Palestinian companies.

H4. Perceived *wasta* climate is positively associated with perceived *wasta*-related

distortion in training and development opportunities in Palestinian companies.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design

The study adopts a mixed-methods design that pairs a quantitative survey with qualitative interviews, so that measurement and meaning can be read together. The survey provides breadth by examining associations between perceived *wasta* climate and perceived distortions across four HRM domains, while the interviews provide contextual depth regarding the perceived mechanisms behind these patterns. The two strands were analyzed separately and then integrated at the interpretation stage, a convergent logic in which the qualitative accounts are used to interpret and enrich the survey results rather than to prove them. This design suits a phenomenon like *wasta* that is at once measurable in its perceived correlates and subtle in its workings, and it provides complementary perspectives on the phenomenon.

3.2 Population and Sample

The study population comprises Palestinian companies and their HR managers. Approximately 450 companies were contacted by email followed by a telephone call, and 201 HR managers completed the questionnaire, yielding an approximate response rate of 44.7%. Because the sampling procedure depended on accessibility and willingness to participate, the sample is treated as a convenience sample rather than a probability sample. Table 1 profiles respondents across gender, experience, and education. The sample is predominantly male (92.0%) and spans a range of experience, with the largest group reporting 6-10 years (41.8%). Most respondents hold a bachelor's degree or lower (63.7%), while 36.3% have postgraduate education. Detailed information on non-responding companies was not available, so a formal non-response bias test could not be conducted.

Table 1. Distribution of the Study Sample by Gender, Years of Experience, and Educational Qualification

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	185	92.0%
	Female	16	8.0%

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage
Total (Gender)		201	100.0%
Years of Experience	Less than 5 years	47	23.4%
	6-10 years	84	41.8%
	More than 10 years	70	34.8%
Total (Experience)		201	100.0%
Educational Qualification	Bachelor's degree or lower	128	63.7%
	Postgraduate Studies	73	36.3%
Total (Education)		201	100.0%

3.3 Data Collection Instrument

A customized questionnaire was developed directly in Arabic, the language used with respondents, drawing on the theoretical literature on wasta and HRM. It comprises 30 items across five constructs: a perceived wasta climate scale (ten items) and four five-item scales capturing perceived wasta-related distortion in promotion, hiring, salary and compensation, and training and development, all rated on a five-point Likert scale from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1). Because the research objective is to examine perceived distortion associated with wasta rather than neutral social networking, most items were worded in a critical direction. To mitigate response bias, respondents were informed that participation was voluntary, responses would be treated confidentially, and the questionnaire was intended to capture perceptions rather than evaluate individual managers or companies. The semi-structured interview protocol mirrored these domains and invited managers to describe, in their own words, how wasta is perceived to enter decision-making, morale, and each HR function, and what might contain it.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity were examined before substantive analysis. Internal consistency, assessed through Cronbach's alpha, was .859 for perceived wasta climate, indicating good reliability. The alpha values for the four perceived wasta-related distortion constructs were .622 for promotion, .713 for hiring, .721 for salary and compensation, and .664 for training and development (Table 2). Thus, two short five-item scales were modest rather than strong, while the other two exceeded the

conventional .70 threshold. Given the exploratory and perception-based nature of the study, all constructs were retained (Hair et al., 2010), but the modest reliability of some scales is acknowledged as a limitation. Face validity was assessed by academic reviewers who evaluated item relevance and clarity before the final instrument was fielded.

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients for the Study Constructs

Questionnaire Dimensions	Number of Items	Reliability Coefficient (Alpha)
Perceived Wasta Climate	10	.859
Perceived Wasta-Related Distortion in Promotion Decisions	5	.622
Perceived Wasta-Related Distortion in Hiring Decisions	5	.713
Perceived Wasta-Related Distortion in Salary and Compensation Decisions	5	.721
Perceived Wasta-Related Distortion in Training and Development Opportunities	5	.664

To address measurement-structure and common-method concerns, two additional diagnostics were added. Harman's single-factor test was conducted using all 30 items; the first unrotated factor explained 31.882% of the total variance, below the commonly used 50% threshold (Podsakoff et al., 2003), suggesting that common method bias is unlikely to fully account for the observed associations. Exploratory principal component analysis with varimax rotation also supported the factorability of the data, with KMO = .894 and Bartlett's test significant, $\chi^2(435) = 2285.726$, $p < .001$. A five-component solution explained 50.707% of the total variance. The rotated component matrix was examined and showed partial alignment with the intended five-construct structure, although several items displayed cross-loadings. Accordingly, the analysis is treated as exploratory evidence of multidimensionality rather than definitive proof of discriminant validity.

4. Results

The descriptive picture is consistent. Every item measuring perceived wasta climate scored above 4.20, and the scale averaged 4.30 on the five-point range (Table 3), indicating that respondents perceive wasta as deeply woven into organizational life. The high mean should be interpreted with care because uniformly high responses may also reflect ceiling effects or a response tendency linked to the sensitive nature of the topic.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for the Perceived Wasta Climate Scale

Questions	Mean	Standard Deviation	Ranking
1. Wasta is commonly used in decision-making processes within the company.	4.41	.710	High
2. Opportunities in the company are granted based on personal relationships rather than competence.	4.32	.663	High
3. Formal procedures are bypassed in favor of those with personal influence.	4.27	.669	High
4. The presence of Wasta affects employee morale in the company.	4.25	.646	High
5. The use of Wasta undermines trust among employees in the company.	4.27	.726	High
6. Management overlooks violations by employees who have Wasta.	4.31	.612	High
7. Wasta negatively affects the efficiency of work in the company.	4.31	.661	High
8. Wasta leads to increased resignations and job instability within the company.	4.31	.703	High
9. Wasta leads to unfair discrimination among employees.	4.20	.721	High
10. Some managers ignore qualified candidates because they do not have strong Wasta.	4.38	.614	High
Overall Perceived Wasta Climate	4.30	.448	High

The same pattern runs through all four distortion constructs, each averaging above 4.0 (Tables 4 to 7). Perceived wasta-related distortion in promotion decisions drew the strongest agreement (mean = 4.45), with advancement seen as tied to relationships more than performance. Perceived distortion in salary and compensation followed very closely (mean = 4.44), while hiring (mean = 4.40) and training and development (mean = 4.38) also showed high levels of agreement. These results indicate that respondents perceive wasta-related distortion across the full range of HRM domains examined.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics: Perceived Wasta-Related Distortion in Promotion Decisions

Questions	Mean	Standard Deviation	Ranking
1. Promotion decisions are based on personal relationships rather than actual performance.	4.47	.557	High
2. Employees with Wasta are often promoted, even if their qualifications do not match the new role.	4.51	.540	High

Questions	Mean	Standard Deviation	Ranking
3. Wasta affects the eligibility of employees for promotion within the company.	4.49	.558	High
4. Success in promotions within the company depends on who you know rather than what you know.	4.26	.695	High
5. Senior positions in the company are given to individuals with personal connections to management.	4.50	.567	High
Overall: Perceived Wasta-Related Distortion in Promotion Decisions	4.45	.370	High

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics: Perceived Wasta-Related Distortion in Hiring Decisions

Questions	Mean	Standard Deviation	Ranking
1. Wasta significantly affects hiring decisions within the company.	4.42	.660	High
2. Preference is given to hiring individuals with personal connections rather than highly qualified candidates.	4.43	.698	High
3. Official hiring criteria are overlooked in favor of those with Wasta.	4.34	.675	High
4. The hiring process is negatively impacted by Wasta interventions.	4.46	.616	High
5. Individuals with Wasta receive job offers more quickly than others.	4.36	.750	High
Overall: Perceived Wasta-Related Distortion in Hiring Decisions	4.40	.465	High

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics: Perceived Wasta-Related Distortion in Salary and Compensation Decisions

Questions	Mean	Standard Deviation	Ranking
1. Salaries and compensations are determined based on personal relationships rather than job performance.	4.48	.584	High
2. Employees with Wasta receive undeserved salary increases and bonuses.	4.48	.617	High
3. Wasta influences the distribution of annual bonuses in the company.	4.46	.624	High
4. Some employees' salaries are determined based on their personal influence.	4.34	.696	High
5. Wasta leads to unjustified salary differences among employees at the same job level.	4.45	.670	High
Overall: Perceived Wasta-Related Distortion in Salary and Compensation Decisions	4.44	.440	High

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics: Perceived Wasta-Related Distortion in Training and Development Opportunities

Questions	Mean	Standard Deviation	Ranking
1. Employees with Wasta receive more training and professional development opportunities than others.	4.39	.671	High
2. Wasta leads to preferential treatment in the allocation of training opportunities.	4.41	.627	High
3. Training opportunities in the company are granted based on personal relationships.	4.37	.612	High
4. Wasta affects the distribution of development opportunities among employees.	4.32	.632	High
5. Individuals with Wasta are given priority in the company's professional development programs.	4.39	.574	High
Overall: Perceived Wasta-Related Distortion in Training and Development Opportunities	4.38	.408	High

Before testing the hypotheses, Pearson correlations among the constructs were examined (Table 8). All coefficients are positive and significant at the 0.01 level. Perceived wasta climate is moderately to strongly correlated with perceived distortion in promotion ($r = .646$), training and development ($r = .631$), hiring ($r = .621$), and salary and compensation ($r = .599$). Inter-construct correlations among the four distortion domains range from .534 to .709. These coefficients support the expected positive associations, but the relatively high correlations also reinforce the need to interpret the constructs as closely related perceptions rather than fully independent objective measures.

Table 8. Pearson Correlation Matrix Among the Study Constructs

Correlations	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perceived Wasta Climate	1				
2. Promotion Distortion	.646**	1			
3. Hiring Distortion	.621**	.617**	1		
4. Salary and Compensation Distortion	.599**	.534**	.657**	1	
5. Training and Development Distortion	.631**	.690**	.709**	.679**	1

Notes. Pearson correlation coefficients are reported. $N = 201$. ** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed). The construct labels refer to: (1) perceived wasta climate; (2) perceived wasta-related distortion in promotion decisions; (3) perceived wasta-related distortion in hiring decisions; (4) perceived wasta-related distortion in salary and compensation decisions; and (5)

perceived wasta-related distortion in training and development opportunities.

To estimate the direct bivariate associations, each perceived wasta-related distortion construct was regressed on perceived wasta climate. Because each model includes one predictor, the standardized coefficient is equivalent to the corresponding bivariate correlation; it is reported for completeness alongside the unstandardized coefficient, 95% confidence interval, R-squared, adjusted R-squared, and F statistic (Table 9).

Table 9. Simple Regression Results for Perceived Wasta Climate and HRM-Domain Distortions

Model	Results
H1: Promotion distortion	$B = .533$, $SE = .045$, standardized beta = .646, 95% CI [.445, .621], $R^2 = .417$, adjusted $R^2 = .414$, $F = 142.235^{***}$
H2: Hiring distortion	$B = .645$, $SE = .058$, standardized beta = .621, 95% CI [.531, .759], $R^2 = .386$, adjusted $R^2 = .383$, $F = 124.945^{***}$
H3: Salary and compensation distortion	$B = .588$, $SE = .056$, standardized beta = .599, 95% CI [.478, .698], $R^2 = .359$, adjusted $R^2 = .356$, $F = 111.407^{***}$
H4: Training and development distortion	$B = .575$, $SE = .050$, standardized beta = .631, 95% CI [.476, .674], $R^2 = .398$, adjusted $R^2 = .395$, $F = 131.830^{***}$

Note. $N = 201$. Beta denotes the standardized coefficient. Because each model has one predictor, beta equals the bivariate correlation. *** $p < .001$.

Table 10. Basic Regression Diagnostic Checks

Model	Diagnostic summary
Promotion	Shapiro-Wilk $p = .411$; homoscedasticity check $\rho = -.219$, $p = .002$; standardized residuals ranged from -3.170 to 2.530; maximum Cook's $D = .066$.
Hiring	Shapiro-Wilk $p = .001$; homoscedasticity check $\rho = -.238$, $p = .001$; standardized residuals ranged from -3.857 to 2.698; maximum Cook's $D = .062$.
Salary and compensation	Shapiro-Wilk $p = .001$; homoscedasticity check $\rho = -.301$, $p < .001$; standardized residuals ranged from -4.184 to 2.586; maximum Cook's $D = .457$.
Training and development	Shapiro-Wilk $p = .031$; homoscedasticity check $\rho = -.133$, $p = .060$; standardized residuals ranged from -2.720 to 3.054; maximum Cook's $D = .138$.

Basic diagnostics indicate that no observation exceeded the conventional Cook's distance threshold of 1.00, although residual normality and homoscedasticity were imperfect in some models. The results are therefore used for exploratory interpretation and not for causal inference.

Across all four models, perceived wasta climate is significantly and positively associated with perceived wasta-related distortion in every HRM domain examined, and all four hypotheses are

supported. The largest association is observed for promotion distortion, followed by training and development, hiring, and salary and compensation. Consistent with the cross-sectional and perception-based design, these coefficients describe associations among perceptions rather than objective HR outcomes or causal effects.

5. Qualitative Findings

The interviews were used to interpret and deepen the survey findings rather than to test them or generate a saturated qualitative theory. Five HR managers from different companies took part. Their responses were reviewed thematically and organized around recurring issues that corresponded to the survey domains and the theoretical framework. Given the small qualitative sample, the themes should be read as illustrative and interpretive. They help explain how respondents understood *wasta* in HRM practice, but they do not provide stand-alone evidence of prevalence or causality. Table 11 summarizes the themes before the discussion that follows.

Table 11. Qualitative Themes, Meanings, Illustrative Evidence, and Theoretical Interpretation

Theme	Meaning	Illustrative evidence	Theoretical interpretation
1. Merit displacement in HR decision-making	Decisions perceived as guided by connections rather than competence or performance	<i>"Decisions are often made based on who you know rather than what you can do... qualified employees are overlooked."</i>	Organizational justice (procedural fairness)
2. Erosion of trust, morale, and the psychological contract	Demotivation and a perceived loss of faith in organizational fairness	<i>"Wasta erodes trust among employees... it demotivates others who work hard but don't have such connections."</i>	Social exchange theory (psychological contract breach)
3. Insider privilege across HR functions	Perceived advantage in hiring, pay, and training for the well-connected	<i>"Those with wasta are often the first to be sent to training programs, leaving others with fewer opportunities."</i>	Bonding social capital (in-group advantage, out-group exclusion)
4. Weak accountability and the need for formal safeguards	Proposed remedies centre on transparent, documented, merit-based procedures	<i>"We need... a more transparent system where decisions are based on clear criteria."</i>	Institutional theory (formal rules constraining informal influence)

The first theme, merit displacement, ran through every interview. Managers described decisions being guided by who you know rather than by competence or performance, with one observing that decisions are "often made based on who you know rather than what you can do," so that "qualified employees are overlooked," and promotions "often predetermined by relationships rather than performance reviews." Read through organizational justice theory, these accounts point to perceived breaches of procedural fairness, consistent criteria set aside, which help explain the high distortion scores recorded in the survey.

The second theme concerns the erosion of trust, morale, and the psychological contract. Managers reported that *wasta* "erodes trust among employees" and "demotivates others who work hard but don't have such connections," with a longer-term cost described as a loss of faith in the organization's fairness. These descriptions align with social exchange theory and the notion of a breached psychological contract, and they clarify why perceived distortion tends to co-occur with lower reported morale. The third theme, insider privilege across HR functions, captures how the same advantage surfaces in hiring, where firms "sometimes end up hiring individuals who are not the best fit for the job," in pay, where *wasta* is linked to "unfair salary differences," and in training, where the connected "are often the first to be sent to training programs." This pattern reflects the exclusionary face of bonding social capital, in which resources embedded in networks accrue to insiders at the expense of the equally or better qualified.

The fourth theme, weak accountability and the need for formal safeguards, emerged from the remedies managers proposed. Their call for a more transparent system where decisions are based on clear criteria, alongside the observation that filling key positions through *wasta* hampers the company's ability to achieve its goals efficiently, points toward documented, merit-based procedure as the natural counterweight. This interpretation fits institutional theory's emphasis on formal rules to constrain informal influence. Taken together, the four themes support and clarify the quantitative results rather than prove them: they illustrate perceived mechanisms, unfairness, weakened trust, insider

advantage, and thin accountability, through which a perceived wasta climate is linked to perceived distortion, and they foreshadow the study's recommendations.

6. Discussion

Read together, the evidence points to a consistent but exploratory pattern. Descriptively, wasta is perceived as highly prevalent; correlationally and in the simple regression models, perceived wasta climate is positively associated with perceived wasta-related distortion across all four HRM domains; and qualitatively, HR managers describe mechanisms that make these associations plausible. The revised statistical diagnostics and relatively high inter-construct correlations require caution, but they do not remove the central finding: HR managers in this sample perceive wasta as connected with merit displacement across multiple HRM functions. This broad pattern is consistent with earlier research portraying wasta not as an isolated personnel practice but as a socially embedded mechanism of influence that can permeate organizational decision-making (Ali & Weir, 2020; Barnett et al., 2013; Hutchings & Weir, 2006). It also accords with evidence that informal networks can simultaneously facilitate access and exchange while creating exclusionary consequences for those outside influential networks (Horak et al., 2020; Weir et al., 2016).

The four theoretical lenses turn this empirical pattern into interpretation. Through the social exchange lens, the positive associations between perceived wasta climate and every distortion construct are consistent with a reciprocity system operating alongside the formal employment exchange. Wasta is sustained partly through obligations created by favours and reciprocal social relationships (Hutchings & Weir, 2006; Smith et al., 2012). Within organizations, however, when employees perceive rewards or opportunities as tracking connections rather than contribution, the implicit employment exchange may be experienced as violated. This interpretation is consistent with evidence connecting wasta with psychological-contract breach and adverse employee responses (Aldossari & Robertson, 2016), as well as research linking favoritism to psychological distress and reduced need satisfaction (Alwerthan et al., 2018). The interview evidence concerning declining trust

and morale should therefore be read as a plausible mechanism through which perceived wasta climate becomes organizationally consequential, rather than as a quantitatively tested mediator.

Organizational justice theory provides a complementary explanation. The interview accounts describe perceived distributive injustice when rewards or opportunities favour connected individuals, procedural injustice when established criteria are bypassed, and interactional injustice when unconnected employees perceive their competence and effort as being discounted. These interpretations are consistent with the broader justice literature (Adams, 1965; Colquitt, 2001; Greenberg, 1990) and with empirical work showing that wasta can undermine merit-based HRM practices and generate perceptions of unfairness in recruitment, promotion, and career advancement (Al-Twal & Cook, 2022; Alsarhan & Valax, 2021; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011). Thus, the present findings add to previous evidence by suggesting that, from the perspective of Palestinian HR managers, perceived unfairness associated with wasta is not confined to one decision point but extends across several stages of the employment relationship.

The social capital perspective further clarifies why the evidence in this study predominantly reflects wasta's negative organizational consequences. Relationships and networks constitute resources that can provide information, access, and influence (Bourdieu, 1986; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Wasta may therefore have a functional side by facilitating transactions, overcoming bureaucratic obstacles, and enabling information exchange (Loewe et al., 2008; Weir et al., 2016). Yet the same network resource may become exclusionary when access to organizational opportunities depends on membership in influential social circles. This distinction mirrors research emphasizing both the bright and dark sides of informal networks (Horak et al., 2020) and of wasta specifically (Megheirkouni & Weir, 2019). In the HRM setting examined here, the exclusionary side appears especially salient: connected insiders are perceived to enjoy advantages while similarly or better-qualified outsiders face restricted access to promotion, recruitment, compensation, or development opportunities.

The institutional perspective helps explain why such practices may persist even when managers

recognize their negative consequences. Informal institutions become especially influential where formal rules are weak, inconsistently implemented, or unable to govern all organizational exchanges (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; North, 1990). Wasta can consequently operate as a parallel informal system through which individuals obtain access, protection, or advantage (Barnett et al., 2013; Minbaeva et al., 2023). Recent work similarly emphasizes the relationship between economic conditions, tribal or social structures, and reliance on wasta networks in workplaces (Alsarhan & Al-Twal, 2023). This perspective is particularly relevant to Palestine, where institutional fragility, political and economic uncertainty, constrained opportunities, and dense social networks may increase reliance on informal relationships. Evidence of wasta within Palestinian healthcare services further demonstrates that the phenomenon extends beyond the private-sector HRM setting investigated here (Takruri et al., 2023). The contribution of the present study is therefore not to establish that wasta exists in Palestine, but to show how HR managers perceive a general wasta climate as extending simultaneously across several core HRM domains.

The pattern across those domains also deserves attention. Promotion showed the strongest association with perceived wasta climate, followed closely by training and development and hiring, while salary and compensation showed the lowest, although still substantial, association. Because these differences are modest and the study did not propose a strong *ex ante* ranking, they should not be interpreted as demonstrating that one HR function is uniquely vulnerable. Nevertheless, the ordering is broadly consistent with previous research emphasizing the importance of wasta for career success, employment access, and advancement (Al-Twal & Aladwan, 2021; Alsarhan & Valax, 2021; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011). Promotion and development decisions often involve judgments concerning readiness, potential, suitability, and access to opportunity, leaving substantial managerial discretion. Where decision criteria are less observable to employees, informal influence may consequently be more readily perceived. Hiring is also a well-established arena for wasta, particularly where personal connections operate as gateways to employment (Al-Twal & Aladwan,

2021), whereas compensation may in some organizations be more constrained by salary structures, grades, or formal administrative procedures.

This interpretation suggests a potentially important theoretical extension. The organizational consequences of wasta may depend not only on the strength of social networks but also on the degree of discretion permitted by formal HR systems. Previous research has shown that favoritism can influence the business climate and organizational processes where institutional safeguards are insufficient (Loewe et al., 2008), while conceptual work on wasta emphasizes the interaction between informal influence and HRM practices (Alsarhan & Valax, 2021). The present findings are compatible with the proposition that stronger HR formalization, clearer decision criteria, and greater accountability may constrain the translation of social influence into HR outcomes. Because the present study did not directly measure HR formalization, governance quality, or managerial autonomy, this interpretation remains tentative. It nevertheless provides a useful direction for future research: organizational formalization and governance may operate as moderators of the association between perceived wasta climate and perceived HRM distortion.

Finally, the Palestinian evidence adds contextual meaning to a literature that has been developed largely through studies from Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, and wider Middle Eastern settings. Prior research has documented wasta in employment access, careers, workplace relations, and organizational decision-making (Al-Twal & Cook, 2022; Aldossari & Robertson, 2016; Loewe et al., 2008; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011), while theoretical scholarship has increasingly treated wasta as a complex informal institution rather than simply an individual act of favoritism (Ali & Weir, 2020; Minbaeva et al., 2023). The present study supports this broader interpretation. In the Palestinian private-sector context, respondents perceive wasta not only as an entry-to-employment mechanism but as an organizational climate associated with decisions extending from recruitment through promotion, compensation, and employee development. At the same time, the study remains exploratory: trust, morale, procedural justice, psychological-contract breach, managerial discretion, and HR formalization were interpreted

through theory and qualitative accounts rather than measured as quantitative mechanisms. These boundaries are important when interpreting the theoretical contribution and provide clear directions for subsequent research.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how HR managers in Palestinian companies perceive *wasta* and how a general perceived *wasta* climate is associated with perceived *wasta*-related distortions in HRM. The evidence is consistent across descriptive statistics, correlations, simple regression models, and illustrative interviews. Respondents reported high levels of perceived *wasta* climate and high levels of perceived distortion in promotion, hiring, salary and compensation, and training and development. The strongest association appeared in promotion, suggesting that advancement decisions may be especially sensitive to perceptions of connection-based influence. The study's contribution lies in positioning *wasta* as an informal institutional climate that is linked to several HRM domains in Palestine, while carefully recognizing that the evidence is cross-sectional, self-reported, and perception-based. The central practical message is clear: reducing *wasta*-related distortion requires not only ethical awareness but also formalized, transparent, and reviewable HRM procedures.

8. Recommendations

Because *wasta* is embedded in social and institutional structures, Palestinian companies should not expect quick solutions based only on ethical appeals. The evidence points instead to the need for practical safeguards that make HRM decisions more transparent, documented, and reviewable. Recommendations should therefore be directed not only to individual HR managers but also to senior management, boards, and policy actors who shape the environment in which HR decisions are made.

For HR managers, the first priority is to formalize merit-based procedures at the points where discretion is highest. Job descriptions, recruitment criteria, interview scoring sheets, promotion rubrics, performance appraisal forms, bonus criteria, and training nomination procedures should be written before decisions are made and applied

consistently across employees. In hiring and promotion, where the associations were strongest, decisions should be supported by documented evidence of qualifications, performance, and role requirements rather than informal recommendations alone.

For senior managers and company boards, formal rules must be supported by oversight. Companies can establish HR decision-review committees, keep audit trails for hiring, promotion, compensation, and training decisions, and periodically compare actual decisions with the stated criteria. Such review does not require a large bureaucracy; even small firms can use simple checklists, written approvals, and documented reasons for exceptional decisions. The aim is to make informal pressure visible and to ensure that deviations from policy can be questioned.

Transparency and communication are equally important. Employees should know the criteria used for advancement, rewards, and development opportunities, and managers should be prepared to explain decisions in a professional and consistent manner. Clear communication reduces ambiguity, and ambiguity is one of the spaces in which *wasta* can operate. Companies should also provide confidential grievance channels and protect employees from retaliation when they report favoritism or procedural unfairness.

Finally, policy actors, professional associations, and business chambers can support organizations by promoting model HR policies, ethics training, and voluntary HR governance standards for the private sector. At the organizational level, leaders must model fair behavior, because employees are unlikely to trust written rules when senior managers visibly bypass them. Taken together, these measures cannot eliminate *wasta* from social life, but they can reduce its influence on HRM decisions by making merit-based practice the normal, documented, and reviewable way of operating.

9. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. First, the study relies on a convenience sample of HR managers, so the findings should be read as indicative rather than representative of all Palestinian companies. The sample is also highly

male dominated, with 92.0% male respondents; because it is not known whether this fully reflects the population of HR managers or partly reflects convenience sampling, gender-related generalizability is limited. Second, the approximate 44.7% response rate should also be considered when interpreting the findings; information on non-responding companies was unavailable, preventing a formal non-response bias check. Third, the study is cross-sectional and perception-based, so it identifies associations among respondents' perceptions rather than causal effects on objectively observed HR decisions. Additional methodological limits should also be noted. The models are simple bivariate regressions without respondent-level or firm-level controls. Future research should use probability sampling, multi-source data from employees and senior managers, longitudinal designs, objective HR records where available, and moderators such as firm size, ownership type, governance quality, ethical climate, HR autonomy, and the formalization of HR systems.

Disclosure Statement

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate:

The study adhered to the ethical principles of scientific research. Data were collected from human resource managers after they had been informed of the purposes of the study, with the confidentiality of their responses and the voluntary nature of their participation ensured.

Availability of Data and Materials: The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Author Contributions: Both authors contributed to the design of the study, data collection and analysis, drafting of the manuscript, and approval of the final version.

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