



Free *qat* handouts secure a high voter turnout in Yemen's elections

For Imam Yahya, one of Yemen's last kings, *qat* was a delight that he praised in poems. For his adversary, the revolutionary al-Zubayri, the plant was the "devil in the shape of a tree".

Still today the views on *qat* greatly diverge. For some, *qat* farming is the *perpetuum mobile* of Yemen's rural economy and *qat* chewing an age-old social pursuit that has helped to preserve Yemeni identity in a rapidly changing world. For others, *qat* is the main inhibitor of human and economic development in Yemen and is to blame for poverty and corruption, the depletion of Yemen's water resources and the country's sloppy approach to fighting Islamist terror.

While some believe that *qat* chewing was the very motor of Yemen's "Arab Spring", others hold it responsible for Yemen's muddled revolution with its high blood toll. In internet blogs even *al-Qaeda*, its affiliates, and sympathizers discuss the pros and cons of the drug, and a number of Yemeni suicide bombers have met their fate with *qat*-filled cheeks. A final decision of *al-Qaeda* on what stance to adopt towards the drug has seemingly been postponed. The Jihadists want to avoid alienating Yemen's population with a premature ban of the popular stimulant before having gained firm control over the country. *Al-Qaeda* has learned from the mistakes of its Islamist sister organization, the al-Shabab militia in war-torn Somalia.

With Yemen's 2011 "Youth Revolution", a decade of half-hearted *qat* policies and missed opportunities has come to an end – a decade, however, that has succeeded in lifting the veil of silence that was cast over *qat* in media and politics after President Ali Abdullah Salih came to power in 1978. This whitewash had been part of a ruling bargain between the Salih regime and the unruly tribes that had imparted highland Yemen several decades of relative stability and Salih a 33-year rule.

With the forecast depletion of Yemen's oil and gas reserves within the next decade, the economic importance of *qat* will further increase and will bring about an important shift in the balance of power from the central government towards the *qat* producing highland tribes. The challenge of addressing the *qat* problem is thus tremendous for Yemen's policy makers. While the transitional government is hesitant about its future *qat* course and anxious not to open a "war" on yet another front, Yemen's anti-*qat* activists have seized the current, favorable climate of change. Emboldened by Yemen's revolution and the ouster of President Salih they have recently launched a series of campaigns against the drug, dubbed a "revolution on one's self".

Politics of Qat

The Role of a Drug in Ruling Yemen

Peer Gatter



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The Role of a Drug in Ruling Yemen

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Front cover: A *qāt* merchant in the highland village
of al-Jabīn in Rayma governorate.

Back cover: Free *qāt* handouts secured a high voter turnout
in Yemen's first direct presidential elections in 1999.

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PROLOGUE

Qāt (*Catha edulis* Forsk.) is a psychoactive stimulant that is grown in many of the highland areas of Eastern Africa, ranging from the southern Sudan through Ethiopia and Kenya to Madagascar and the Transvaal. It is also grown across the Red Sea in Yemen's western highlands and in the 'Asīr and Jāzān mountains of Saudi Arabia.¹ While being considered a drug in most Arab states, as well as in many western countries, there is no viable legislation in Yemen today effectively controlling its cultivation, consumption or trade.²

The hardy tree that is famed by farmers for its drought resistance, is grown according to official statistics on 12% of Yemen's agricultural land, covering 153,500 hectares in 2009.³ A number of leading Yemeni researchers however believe that the actual figure may be double.⁴ In some of Yemen's highland districts over 90% of farmers are involved in *qāt* agriculture, growing the drug on over 80% of the cultivated land.⁵ According to Yemen's 2003 agricultural census 494,000 landholders grow *qāt* in the mountain areas. This is 43.6% of the country's farmers and represents 3.9 million persons, considering average Yemeni farming family size of just below eight.⁶ *Qāt* accounts for 6% of the country's GDP and for as much as one third of the agricultural GDP.⁷ It accounts for an average of 10% of the expenditures of Yemeni families, but *qāt*-related spending may reach nearly 40% in poor households.⁸ The *qāt* sector provides employment for one in every seven working Yemenis. In the capital Ṣan'a' alone, some 13,000 persons are involved in the sale of the drug⁹. On average 72% of Yemeni men and 33% of women above the age of 12 chew the bitter leaves of the *qāt* plant. Some 42% of male consumers chew five to seven days per week and display compulsive habits.¹⁰

As the predominant cash crop and mainstay of the country's rural economy, the income *qāt* generates prevents people in many of Yemen's highland areas from drifting into the cities in order to seek work. The distribution network for *qāt* is undoubtedly the most advanced in the nation and few other economic sectors feature such a high level of organization. But *qāt* also depletes scarce water resources, contributes to soil degradation, and has crowded out production of essential food crops and agricultural exports. The area under *qāt* has expanded nearly 20-fold over the last four decades, displacing exportable coffee, fruits and vegetables, sorghum and wheat. Exports of cash crops such as coffee have been regressive while food imports have exploded due to the inroads made by *qāt* in the rural economy.¹¹

Qāt consumption and *qāt*-related expenditure also contribute to corruption, poverty, malnutrition and the disintegration of families. For its producers and consumers alike, *qāt* is seen as one of the main health hazards in Yemen, mainly due to the unregulated use of pesticides in its cultivation. Given the economic importance of *qāt*, it is not surprising that taxes stemming from the production and sale of the plant are substantial and constitute the main source of local revenue for many governorate and district administrations. The *qāt* sector contributes to government revenue in four ways, by a religious tithe levied on *qāt* production (*zakāt*), a public cleaning tax for keeping *qāt* markets tidy, and finally by a *qāt* consumption tax and a youth & sports tax, both levied on *qāt* sales. While *zakāt* is imposed as a direct tax and collected at farm level by *zakāt* assessors, the other taxes are levied as indirect taxes at military checkpoints on the roads leading into the cities and in *qāt* markets. The *qāt* consumption tax alone amounted to 3.4 billion Yemeni riyāls in 2010 (US\$ 16 million). *Qāt* is also smuggled across the mountains into Saudi Arabia where its consumption and trade are banned. This business is believed to award Yemen revenues of at least US\$ 1 billion every year. The government has however no control over this illicit trade and it is believed that its proceeds help to finance the Ḥawthī insurgency in Yemen's northern Ṣa'da province.

Colonial government's in Aden and East Africa have issued repeated bans on *qāt*, to little avail. Also, the modernist revolutionary governments of North and South Yemen have since the late 1960s initiated a number of anti-*qāt* campaigns and even threatened to uproot the trees. With President 'Alī 'Abd Allāh Ṣāliḥ's ascent to power in 1978 the *qāt* issue became a taboo and the crop disappeared

from national statistics. At the same time, *qāt* production by highland tribes was promoted by countless exemptions and subsidies that triggered an unprecedented mining of groundwater resources. A diesel subsidy made *qāt* cultivation a highly profitable venture even in the desert-like eastern plateau and escarpment areas of Ṣan‘ā’, al-Jawf and Mārib governorates. Here limited rainfall had so far set narrow boundaries to agriculture. It seems that the toleration and promotion of the drug was part of a power bargain between the Ṣāliḥ regime and the restive tribes that, after the political turmoil of the late 1970s, has imparted highland Yemen several decades of relative stability. It would be nearly 20 years until renewed efforts against the spread of the drug were made and before *qāt* reappeared in Yemen’s statistical yearbooks upon pressure of the country’s international creditors.

The 1990 unification with socialist South Yemen, where strict *qāt* regulations had been in place, did not impact the northern stance of *qāt*. Southern laws were repealed and the northern mantle of secrecy regarding *qāt* extended over the whole country. In the wake of the 1994 war of secession, tens of thousands of northern troops were stationed in every part of the former south. As most of these soldiers were confirmed *qāt* chewers, the distribution networks for the drug have been extended even to remote desert watch posts and Bedouin settlements on the Saudi and Omani borders. Growing consumption of *qāt* among the southern population has led over the past two decades to ever increasing financial transfers from this economically marginalized part of the country to the northern highlands.

Today, *qāt* chewing is an integral part of life all across Yemen and a generally accepted habit in all strata of society. Even afternoon sessions in ministries or in the country’s consultative assembly are held in a setting of chewing. Also, Yemen’s political and economic elite has during the past decades developed a vested interest in *qāt*. Many have invested in the *qāt* sector since the returns generated by *qāt* cultivation and trade are simply staggering. The highland tribes in whose territories the bulk of *qāt* is produced have greatly profited from the *laissez faire* approach of the government. Profits from the *qāt* sector have enabled them to maintain their autonomy *vis-à-vis* the state and build up true tribal armies equipped even with heavy weaponry. Any reduction in *qāt* production, let alone a ban of the crop or of its consumption would thus not only adversely affect the rural highland population, but is bound to arouse the resistance of the tribes and further destabilize the country making it perfectly ungovernable.

Factors constraining change in Yemen regarding *qāt* are foremost the government’s fear of the tribes and of public unrest as well as the involvement of many members of the ruling class in *qāt* farming. Paired with the inability of authorities to enforce legislation in the cities – not to mention the tribal areas – this makes policymakers reluctant to speak out openly against *qāt*. This is exacerbated by a flagrant lack of alternative pastimes, the absence of other viable and profitable economic activities, and by the lack of markets for alternative high-value crops.

The second part of the 1980s saw the beginning of a transformation of the two Yemeni states from semi-rentiers heavily dependent on migrant remittances and unstable political rents into a politically unified oil rentier. Since then politics in Yemen have become tightly entangled with the windfalls from the oil sector and world market prices for oil. The revenues from the petroleum sector account for over 90% of Yemen’s export earnings and for around 70% of government revenue. They have enabled the regime in the second part of the 1990s and early 2000s to considerably enlarge its network of patronage and extend its power over many areas of the countryside. During this period *qāt* politics has become more and more entangled with the revenue situation of the regime and has been employed increasingly as a means of rent-seeking during times of crisis. Despite the staunch resistance of *qāt* farmers and tribes, the government has since 1999 repeatedly embarked on anti-*qāt* campaigns with high audience appeal. These campaigns were often rather spontaneous and ill coordinated. Most of them were thus short-lived and laws enacted concerning *qāt* were never really enforced (e.g. the 2002 law proscribing chewing in government facilities). These campaigns have effectuated no change in terms of cultivation and consumption of the drug, but have succeeded in earning Yemen’s policy makers the respect of their Arab counterparts and the benevolence of the donor community. Without compromising its grip on power, the regime has become the recipient of

increasing levels of development aid. *Qāt* policy has handsomely paid off, not the least in the promise of admitting Yemen to the Gulf Cooperation Council by 2016.

Qāt also played an important role during Yemen's 'Youth Revolution' of 2011. Often believed to be a drug engendering complacency, lethargy and inaction, *qāt* has helped to mobilize both the regime's supporters and anti-*Ṣāliḥ* protesters: Supporters of the regime erected their tents on Taḥrīr Square and attempted to sit out the protests while chewing *qāt* freely handed out by the regime. In 'Change Square' where the revolution was masterminded and where protesters had erected their tent city, a new visionary order for a post-*Ṣāliḥ* era was vividly discussed and elaborated while chewing *qāt*.

As Yemen heads towards the post oil era – with some analysts predicting a depletion of oil reserves as early as 2017 – it will be interesting to observe what role *qāt* and *qāt* revenue will play in this future polity. Will the regime be able to capitalize on the *qāt* sector? Will it succeed in tightening its grip on *qāt* markets and in streamlining *qāt* taxation to make up for lost revenue from oil? Or will the disintegrating network of patronage make the country perfectly ungovernable with *qāt* producing tribes gaining yet more autonomy and *qāt* becoming the true ruler of this society as it is in much of Somalia today?

Is *Qāt* a Drug?

In Yemen *qāt* is not considered as a drug by authorities and even car insurance policies explicitly cover accidents caused while chewing *qāt* while driving (see annex 41). *Qāt* may or may not be a drug in the clinical sense, thus a drug causing physical addiction. The leaves of the *qāt* tree are certainly a social drug. Social life in most parts of Yemen circulates around *qāt* today and many Yemenis believe there would not be any social life at all, were there not *qāt*. Chewing the leaves creates delight, relaxes, and stimulates mutual understanding and companionship. It helps to create strong bonds between people and facilitates the mediation of Yemen's many tribal troubles. Not a mere few believe they cannot get up, let alone work, without *qāt* and thus start their day with chewing. *Qāt* gives them strength of the body and strength of will. Chewing *qāt* makes one forget despair and violence – be it just for a few hours – it makes one cope with the grievances of life and it gives hope in a country whose political and economic future looks so bleak. It makes one forget poverty and the hungry mouths to feed at home.

Yet many Yemenis – educated or not – would like to abstain from the use of the leaves from time to time, be it for financial, family or health reasons. But they feel compelled to chew by friends, neighbors or colleagues and fear exclusion from social circles and social life. Many fear the loss of respect, the loss of business opportunities, or simply the exclusion from information circulating in *qāt* chews. Over the years, I have observed how the chewing habit has proliferated in the Ḥaḍramawt and on the island of Socotra (areas that I first visited in 1993); how it took hold of the coastal population and then slowly crept up the *wādīs* to the herders of the highlands, how it spread from soldiers to fishermen, from traders to farmers, from adults to adolescents, and finally from husbands to wives. I watched a defenseless and desperate population – local councillors, shaykhs, fathers and spouses – fighting its spread with all means at hand. Without success. I watched how *qāt* ravaged these regions' unique culture and how it changed social customs and society, how traditional leisure pursuits disappeared and how values and ethics have become diluted.

I have known Yemen for almost twenty years, took part in innumerable *qāt* chews and interviewed several thousands of people on the *qāt* issue. For me, the leaves of the *qāt* tree are not a narcotic drug. However, I hold the firm belief that they are much more than the "mild social stimulant" to which literature so often refers. They are potent social drug, holding Yemen and Yemeni life firmly in its grip. They create a mental form of addiction that makes the plant as ravaging and certainly as dangerous as any narcotic drug.

Approach of the Study¹²

The literature on the habit of *qāt* chewing, its social role and the impact of *qāt* use on health is quite impressive. This book does not attempt to duplicate this and is focussing on the role of *qāt* in the politics of modern Yemen and of the wider region – a topic that has so far been entirely ignored. The review of *qāt* policies and economic events during the past decades will show how successive Yemeni governments have apprehended and used *qāt* increasingly as an instrument of politics. It will show that government action regarding the drug is less driven by a genuine desire for reform or by the interest of ridding Yemeni society of a social evil, but much rather by the need for mobilizing financial resources and by a desire for societal control and political stability. *Qāt* politics – the study suggests – has above all become part of a comprehensive strategy of rent-seeking, employed by the ruling elite in times of revenue crisis in order to uphold the state's monopoly of power and maintain its widespread network of patronage. *Qāt* politics is since the late 1970s part of a ruling bargain between the regime and the tribes, explaining the tolerant and often supportive stance of government towards the drug.

After a brief overview of the history and development of *qāt* consumption in Yemen as well as on the extent of the habit and its detrimental effects on health, both in chapter I, in chapter II the metamorphosis of Yemen during the 1970s from an agrarian into a semi-rentier state is documented, as well as its transformation from a country depending largely on worker remittances and political rents into an oil economy. The book then analyzes *qāt* politics in a regional retrospect (chapter III). This includes the struggle of colonial administrations against *qāt* in Yemen and Eastern Africa, the role of *qāt* during the reign of Yemen's last Imāms and the position of the League of Arab States *vis-à-vis* the drug. Here also the fruitless efforts of the Saudi Arabian government and of Saudi religious scholars against the crop are presented and an analysis of *qāt* politics in post-colonial Somalia given, where the drug has become one of the factors fueling the prolonged civil war. In chapter IV, the approach to *qāt* of Yemen's revolutionary governments in both South and North Yemen is described, whereupon in chapter V changes in *qāt* politics and the in development of *qāt* farming during the first two decades of the Ṣāliḥ regime are given a closer look. Chapter VI documents in great detail, how *qāt* has become an instrument of rent-seeking in times of financial and political crisis.

In chapter VII, the ups and downs of *qāt* politics following Yemen's First National Conference on *Qāt* are described and the *qāt* activism of the country's ruling class documented following the Gulf Cooperation Council's expression of intent to admit Yemen to the organization if it combats corruption, weapons and *qāt*. Here also interviews with a number of high-ranking Yemeni policy makers on the subject of *qāt* are echoed.

In chapter VIII, the role *qāt* plays for political stability, political control and for identity in a fragile state is analyzed. This chapter also reviews the role of *qāt* in the Ṣa'da war and in terrorism, in spreading northern hegemony over former South Yemen, and it discusses the role of *qāt* in Yemen's 2011 'Youth Revolution'. Further, the effects of *qāt* on corruption and the importance of *qāt* revenue for Yemen's decentralization process are examined. Also, the difficult task of civil society organizations and of religious communities fighting *qāt* is documented.

Finally, in chapter IX, conclusions are presented and an outlook for a Yemen after the conclusion of the oil era is given.

Peer Gatter, Frankfurt am Main, June 2012

www.qat-yemen.com