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
Cover illustrations:
Front cover: A qāṭ merchant in the highland village of al-Jabīn in Rayma governorate.
Back cover: Free qāṭ handouts secured a high voter turnout in Yemen’s first direct presidential elections in 1999.

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
L. The Scent of Jasmine in the Land of Qât\(^747\)
or the Arab Revolution, Yemeni Style

When in mid January 2011, a popular uprising forced the Tunisian dictator Zayn al-'Abidin bin ‘Ali into exile, hundreds of Yemenis also took to the streets, protesting against unemployment, corruption, and proposals of the government for constitutional amendments that would allow President Ṣāliḥ to run for office yet another time. With popular unrest spreading throughout the Arab world and emboldened by the dynamics of the uprising in Egypt, the Yemeni protest movement quickly gained momentum and grew in size. Initial demands of the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP)\(^748\) for a return to a ‘National Dialogue’ on political reforms that had been laid on ice in late 2010\(^749\) were soon superseded by calls for a removal of President Ṣāliḥ from office. Before long tens of thousands of Yemenis took to the streets in both the northern and southern governorates united by the call of “Irḥal!”, “Leave!”. Protesters chanted slogans such as “Bin ‘Ali leaves after 20 years, for Yemen 30 years are enough” or “Yesterday Tunisia, today Egypt, tomorrow Yemen”. They carried posters of Che Guevara, Ibrāhīm al-Ḥamdī or Jār Allāh ‘Umar\(^750\) and banners reading “No to hereditary rule, no to the rule of one family, no to constitutional amendments”\(^751\). When after the first climax of anti-government protests in Egypt, Yemen’s opposition called for an Egyptian-style “Day of Rage”, President Ṣāliḥ was fast to act. Following a major demonstration of over 16,000 protestors in Ṣanʿā’, President Ṣāliḥ addressed the nation in a televised speech, declaring that Yemen was neither Tunisia nor Egypt, but a democratic country and that he would be ready to pass on power at the end of his term in 2013 in the framework of Yemen’s constitution. He called upon the people to “not cross the line” and warned them of “anarchy and personal loss”\(^752\). Many perceived this as a hidden threat.\(^753\)

On February 2, a day ahead of the “Day of Rage”, Ṣāliḥ announced that he would neither run for reelection in 2013, nor would be pass power to his son Ahmad.\(^754\) The Yemeni press had reported already on January 24 that Ṣāliḥ had spoken out against the passage of power within his family: “Talking about hereditary rule is an impudent symphony, we are a republican and democratic system and we are against hereditary rule […] of villages, of tribes, of power, of unity, of ministries, we are against hereditary rule.”\(^755\) But Yemen’s opposition had little reason to believe this pledge. Already in 2006, Ṣāliḥ had announced that he would not run for the presidency again, but had in the following weeks paid thousands of have-nots with gifts of qât and free meals to take to the streets to call for his return. Feigning reluctance, he accepted this call by the populace and took upon his shoulders the heavy burden of the presidency once again.

Demonstrations End When the Qât Markets Open

Yemen’s “Day of Rage” brought some 20,000 to Ṣanʿā’’s streets, but protests failed at least initially to develop the same dynamics as in Egypt where sit-ins on Cairo’s Liberation Square, the Maydān al-Taḥrīr, turned into over-night public festivals. Yemen’s uprising ended punctually at noon when the qât markets opened. Newspapers around the world did not fail to note, that Yemen’s uprising may have a different fate than those in northern Africa, and that qât may be to blame. On February 5, 2011, the headline of the Arizona Daily Star read: “Addictive leaves take the starch out of popular uprising. Yemen protests lose momentum to khat-chewing”. The Washington Post titled on the same day: “In Yemen, everything stops for khat – including revolution”. Reuters and the Israeli daily Haaretz assumed on February 10 that: “Qat addiction may stem Yemen protests”\(^756\) and on February 17, the New York Times characterized Yemen’s protest a stillbirth, titling: “Qat got their tongues”. The German Spiegel Online described the protest in their early phase:

“Just in time for lunch the ‘Day of Rage’ ends in Yemen’s capital Sana’a. The tens of thousands of demonstrators, who had a few minutes ago still been angry, but peacefully calling for the removal of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, incumbent since 32 years, rush home through congested streets. The cries of “Down with Ali!” have died down. Also the counter-demonstration organized by the government […] is dissolving. Young and old now cozy up to thick cushions on the floor and start to stuff qat leaves
into their cheeks. The afternoon also in these [troubled] times belongs to the mild drug. The revolution takes a break. No one here wants unrest and violence like in Egypt. This calm is also to the liking of the broad alliance of opposition parties that had called for the protest. Neither the Socialists nor the Islah party that is influenced by tribes and Islam can present a candidate with majority appeal for the Presidential palace. For too long Saleh has been in power and all too fragmented is the political landscape.”

Even in online blogs the qat factor in Yemen’s revolution was vividly debated, but its influence on the progression of anti-government protests was questioned much more cautiously here than in the established media. Blogger Jacob Sullum posted a comment on reason.com entitled “A drug so powerful it causes aggression and passivity”:

“Reuters reports that anti-government protests in Yemen have been half-hearted compared to the revolt that brought down Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak, and it suggests an explanation: By noon the protesters quietly vanish. Many head straight from the streets to the souk, or market, to buy bags stuffed with qat […]. The Yemen protesters’ midday departures cast doubt on whether Yemenis are ready to mount a sustained revolt that would be needed to topple President Ali Abdullah Saleh from the leadership of the Arab world’s poorest country […]. This knock against qat might puzzle anyone who remembers the press coverage of Somalia’s civil war in the early 1990s, when qat allegedly made young gunmen irritable, aggressive, and trigger-happy. Now Reuters claims the very same plant makes chewers directly across the Gulf of Aden passive, lazy, and listless. To reinforce this new story line, it calls qat (accurately) a ‘mild’ stimulant – which was not the impression left by the stories about Somalia’s qat-crazed killers – [… that described] the plant (inaccurately) as a ‘narcotic’.”
Like Cairo, Ṣanʿa’ also has its Liberation Square, the Maydān al-Taḥrīr, just outside the ancient old city gate Bāb al-Šabāb. After the events in Egypt it became a site of symbolic importance also for Yemeni opposition groups. But protest marches to the square were swiftly put down by the regime and demonstrators were hindered from occupying it. Aware of the square’s symbolic importance, the government was quick to fill the Maydān al-Taḥrīr with pro-government rallies. Ṣāliḥ supporters were conscribed in ministries and state schools and carted to the square in hundreds of busses and trucks. In the Ministry of Civil Service lists were distributed asking government employees to sign if they wanted to demonstrate for Ṣāliḥ. Naturally few dared to decline in fear of losing their positions. To limit the access to the square during the morning hours, car traffic was blocked from the streets around the Ṭaḥrīr by barricades of barbed wire guarded by heavily armed soldiers. To halve the space that could potentially be used by demonstrators, on February 9th a women’s handicraft exhibition opened its doors on the square’s western side and in the eastern section a tent city hosting a large book fair was put up. Day by day also the number of tents erected to host Ṣāliḥ supporters grew. On February 14th, three large wedding tents of up to 50 meters length were installed. Here pro-government groups could hang out during the afternoons for qaṭ chewing and recover from morning rallies and their clashes with Ṣāliḥ critics. A day later, already 12 tents had sprung up, displacing the book fair and occupying even some side streets. On February 16th, the square was packed with 20 long tents, some hosting up to 800 government supporters, chewing here until late at night. Many of these tents had even colorful plastic qamariyyas to enhance the feeling of being in a cozy traditional mafraj. The tents represented different tribes that had come to Ṣanʿa’ in support of the regime. Large banners decorating the tent entrances gave witness of who had come out to lend the President a hand: The Sons of Hamdān, the Citizens of Khawlān, the Families of Bani Ḥushaysh or the Tribes of al-Hayma al-Dākhiliyya and al-Khārijīyya, each with a slogan for democracy or stability. The Citizens of Jiḥāna District gathered under the motto “No to destruction and killing of innocent lives” and the Sons of Arḥab were united by the call for “Support to Destruct Terrorism”. But there were also tents of imaginary organizations that had just emerged for giving proof of the wide support the Ṣāliḥ regime enjoyed within Yemen’s allegedly very pluralist political system. The Yemeni Organization to Rise up Against Those Seeking Foreign Assistance Against Yemen, was one of them. In its tent dirty have-nots and day-laborers gathered for a free lunch under the slogan “Democracy is a Competition to Serve the Nation. No to Chaos and Destruction of Yemen!” In the entrance of each tribal tent a shaykh would sit – chewing of course, surrounded by his bodyguards. He would hold uplifting speeches with a hoarse voice and swear in the crowd to unity or Ṣāliḥ-style democracy until qaṭ would take its toll (see picture 347 of Shaykh ‘Alī Muḥsin al-Arḥab with members of his tribe). By 4 p.m. the congregations in most tents had come to a rest and silence reigned. The sāʾa sulaṭānīyya had commenced, the hour of King Solomon’s infinite wisdom. Those gathered would retreat to silent thoughts and fall into the lethargy produced by qaṭ leaves. At this time also the security personnel guarding Taḥrīr Square would chew. The barricades of barbed wire would be lifted on ‘Abd al-Mughnī Street, the great traffic axis leading past the square. “Revolutions threaten Yemen only in the mornings, but never after lunch when our country’s true leader, qaṭ has taken control”, a commanding officer said jokingly. At nightfall drum music filled the tents and chewers formed circles around a few men performing jambiyya dances.

Qaṭ Payoffs to Reward Partisans

To recompense Ṣāliḥ’s supporters for their dedication, the regime served a free lunch of rice and chicken in the tents and provided bottled water and a bag of Hamdānī qaṭ for each. In addition, a daily subsidy of YR 2,000 (ca. US$ 9.3) was handed out. On February 14, 2011, the fourth day of consecutive anti-Ṣāliḥ agitations, this allowance was raised to YR 3,000 – four times the average salary of a day laborer. On some days the government seemed overwhelmed with the huge turnout of have-nots it had provoked with its free handouts of food and qaṭ. The author overheard a conversation between an official organizing the pro-government rallies and the angered shaykh of
Bani Maṭar, Nājī Muhammad al-Nihmī, who had come to Ṣan‘ā’ with some 60 tribesmen. “It is now one o’clock and we have been waiting for our money and our qāt since noon” the elderly shaykh shouted. “If we will not receive it within the next hour, we will fight for the other side tomorrow.”[763] Rumors had it that also some anti-Ṣāliḥ protesters would join the camp of supporters in the afternoons to collect a meal and enjoy free qāt. It is estimated that in February 2012 alone the regime spent some US$ 15 to 20 million in allowances for protesters at Tahrīr Square, of which probably a third represented spending on qāt.[764] In late January, Ṣāliḥ had already announced to increase the salary of civil servants and soldiers by 30-40%, representing a monthly raise of about YR 10,000 for average servicemen in order to preserve the loyalty among government ranks and the military (ca. US$ 47/month). “No small sum for a country where 40 percent of the population lives on less than $2 a day”, noted Reuters.[765] In February, Ṣāliḥ made further pledges such as creating a fund to employ 25% of university graduates, exempting students of fees, reducing income taxes and adding half a million smaller demonstrations and sit-ins organized by the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) in front of Sana‘a Yemen Observer reported that Ṣan‘ā’ citizens “received at least YR 2000 each for participating in the demonstrations and sit-ins organized by the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) in front of Sana‘a University […]. They also get food and qat to make sure that they stay the whole day”. Allegedly, even smaller qāt sellers joined the protesters since these subsidies represented more than what they could earn in a day by selling qāt. Other qāt dealers reported to the press that their sales had greatly increased in recent days as “many more citizens now buy qat because they have money from the organizers of the demonstrations.”[767] In an April article Muḥammad al-Kibṣi of the Yemen Observer even further, accusing the opposition of embezzlement to finance the protests:

“One more suspicious issue is the financing of the protests. It is well known that the thousands of protesters that have been sitting in front of Sana‘a University for the past two months are receiving free food and even qat. The question is who has been funding this for thousands of people? Only a well-organized body like the Islamic brothers (al-Islah) can fund such issues. Some media outlets have alleged that Ḥamīd al-Aḥmar is the one that provides funds for the protesters and he has said that he would pay the required funds for ensuring the success of the revolution. Also, it is well known that the Islamic brothers in Yemen are controlling the al-Aqṣā fund that receives donations from many Yemenis across the country. Documents proved that the fund that is supposed to provide aid to Palestinians has never provided any aid. No one knows where these huge donations pour into [...].”[768]

An observer of the protest movement qualified this as propaganda:

“I’m not so sure that getting free lunches and qāt at ‘Change Square’ proves a conspiracy theory. The vast majority of protesters are camping out at their own expense and while some people may be getting donations from benevolent businessmen to stay at ‘Change Square’, the greater part is sacrificing a lot more than they are getting out of it […]. There is a great atmosphere of sharing and cooperation […]. We know two young brothers who take turns every week staying in a tent, because someone has to watch over the shop in their home town an hour outside Ṣan‘ā’ while the other volunteers at the protest camp. They would laugh at the idea of someone paying them to do this […]. I know of women who are selling their gold jewelry to support their husbands in the protests. The last three Fridays the pro-democracy demonstrators have moved the Friday prayer from ‘Change Square’ over to the 60 Meter Road to have more space and to mobilize more people. If Ḥamīd al-Aḥmar or anyone else was going to pay all these people, up to 1.5 million of them, even 10 riyals each he would be broke a hundred times over. Ṣāliḥ can barely manage to mobilize some twenty thousand supporters on Fridays while the daily anti-Ṣāliḥ marches easily reach the hundreds of thousands in many cities. Businessmen and companies are contributing discreetly to the revolution, albeit mostly through treating injured demonstrators at private hospitals. Government hospitals are refusing to treat the injured protesters […].”[769]

Also Qaḥṭan al-Asbaḥ, Policy Team Leader of the USAID’s Responsive Governance Project, doubted that it was qāt that attracted people to the protest rallies:

“The opposition parties do not have the financial means to hand out qāt to masses of people. Maybe to just a few as a compensation for their services. They are bringing eloquent people from all over the country as speakers in the rallies. Many of them are teachers. I met a group of about a hundred
teachers mostly from Ta‘izz and Ibb in a cheap restaurant in Sāq al-‘Aṣīd, eating the poor man’s lunch ‘Aṣīd. They all had huge bundles of qāt under their arms that had been given to them by the organizers of the protests. As they had come as guests to Ṣan‘ā’ it is only natural that their hosts provided for them.”

At Ṣan‘ā’ University, where the phalanx of the anti-Ṣā’ilīḥ opposition had been demonstrating, after days of unsuccessful protests, self-critical undertones were also heard. The tenor of these voices was summed up – not without sarcasm – by Rashīd ‘Abd al-Ghānī, a student speaker of the Faculty of Medicine:

“As long as qāt is more important to us than politics there cannot be any true revolution in Yemen. We are being instrumentalized far too easily by free gifts of qāt. But you shall see, when the day has come that qāt will disappear from our markets, a fierce revolution will break out all over the country! But I fear that its aim will not be democracy. It will rather be a distribution battle, a bloody war over the last bundles of qāt. And you shall also see, the new President will not be he who brings freedom and development to Yemen, but he who succeeds to bring back qāt into our cheeks.”

Another protester joked: “If Yemenis want to get rid of the President, they simply have to boycott the qāt markets for a week or two. Then the tribes will run dry of funds and come to Ṣan‘ā’ and chase Ṣā’ilīḥ out of office.”

On internet blogs, sympathizers of the Youth Revolution called for overcoming qāt, “It’s a little price to pay oh people of Yemen! Qāt has robbed you as much as Ali [President Ṣā’ilīḥ] has robbed you […]. We need to recognize that as long as Yemen continues to chew qāt […] there will not be any guts nor glory for it […].” But these were scattered voices that went unheard. The Islāḥ party, representing the interests of many of the qāt producing highland tribes, plainly denied that qāt had anything to do with protests melting away at lunch time: “It’s not the time for long protests yet. These protests were a message in the first stage. Later will come the long protests”, Muhammad al-Sa‘īdī, the party’s undersecretary said. Qāt was defended and attributed an important role for mobilization. Activists pointed out that it served as a “social lubricant” that helps to fuel the movement against Ṣā’ilīḥ. “Sure we use Facebook like kids in other countries, but a lot of the protests that were organized, students planned at khat sessions. Khat has a positive role in political mobilization,” 23-year old university student Fākhīr al-‘Azāb said.

Cheap Qāṭ for De-Escalation in Southern Yemen

The violent riots that had befallen Yemen after raising fuel prices in 2005 had taught the government that de-escalation had to start in qāt markets. During the days of violent anti-government protests in February 2011, outside many of the capital’s bigger qāt markets military vehicles with heavy machine guns mounted on the truck beds had taken position. Qāt markets such as that of the Ḥadda and al-Hasāba neighborhoods with their large gatherings of qāt sellers and clients had in 2005 been the germ cell of anti-government agitation. From here protest marches and violence had spread throughout Ṣan‘ā’ (see chapter VIII. A). Thus when fighting between the government and tribes escalated in late May 2011 in Ṣan‘ā’, a number of qāt markets in locations considered to be of strategic importance were closed down (see below).

In Yemen’s south, an area having called during the past years ever more violently for secession, the government manipulated qāt prices and qāt supply in the hope this could help to keep people busy chewing and thus quiet. During February 2011, qāt prices dropped to an unprecedented low in Aden and the Ḥaḍramawt despite the winter season when qāt is usually scarce and expensive. Aden chewers reported that they had never seen qāt so plentiful in the markets, as in the days following the euphoria of overthrowing the Egyptian Mubārak regime. While in highland cities such as Ṣan‘ā’ or Ta‘izz it would be rather difficult to manipulate the price of qāṭ through government subsidies, as too many small agents and sellers are involved in its marketing, it is fairly easy to control the qāṭ flow to the
desert areas of Aden and Ḥadramawt. As qāt cannot be grown in these arid lowlands and since long-distance qāt transport is quite expensive, the trade is monopolized by comparatively few wholesalers originating from Yemen’s highlands who can rather easily be induced by payoffs to manipulate the market (see chapter VIII. C). At least initially the plan seems to have worked. Even if the regime could not wholly prevent demonstrations in the south the turnout in February anti-government rallies was much lower than in demonstrations staged against unity during the preceding years. The initial protests were also described as much less violent than expected.779

Chewing for a New Era

Qāt, which analysts had held in the initial phase of the protests responsible for stemming change, was soon to become the very motor for forming the new society that emerged in the discussions and minds of protesters. While in early February 2011 protests had still ended at noon as activists retreated to buy and chew qāt, by late February more and more people would remain camping at the protests sites and consume their qāt rations in the emerging tent city. As an anonymous observer commented, people also adjusted their chewing habits and were now “willing to go on 3-4 hour marches starting at 4 pm, with qāt in their mouths instead of being nailed to their seats.” 780


New qāt markets burgeoned around Ṣan’a’ University, as demand for the leaves increased at this epicenter of the protests. Qāt had been relatively costly until mid-February due to the rising demand and the cold weather persisting in the preceding months that made irrigation in many highland areas risky due to frost. With rising temperatures and with many farmers wanting to capitalize on the protests, qāt prices collapsed in late February. By intensive irrigation of their qāt farms in the dry
VIII. Qāt, Governance and Political Stability

Plateau and basin areas of Nihm, Khawlān, Arhab, Bani Ḥushaysh and Hamdān, farmers had inundated the Ṣanʿaʾ market with qāt, rapidly leading to an oversupply and bringing prices for a bag of medium quality qaṭal down from YR 2,000 in February to around YR 800 in March (from ca. US$ 9.30 to $3.70).781

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Qāt chews also helped to forge new alliances in the anti-Ṣāliḥ camp as the agitation and communal chewing sessions soon brought together people from all walks of life and all areas of Yemen. By the end of February, the protesters who until then had represented for the most part the young urban population received reinforcements from the countryside, when several of Yemen’s major tribes joined the uprising. The protest camp at Ṣanʿaʾ University before long developed into a city within the city. An agglomeration of tents, extending for over six kilometers from the old university near Zubayr Street along Ṣanʿaʾ’s several lane Ring Road and into countless side streets past the new university as well as onto Cairo Street, from where it wound further west, reaching the 60 Meter Road. Reportedly, the tent city had a permanent population of around 100,000 that rose to 300,000 on weekends.782 Its center was the intersection at the Ṣanʿaʾ University’s main gate quickly dubbed by the protesters Maydān al-Taghyir ("Change Square") – a play of words as the name recalled the similar sounding Maydān al-Taḥrīr that had been monopolized by the pro-Ṣāliḥ camp. The camp at ‘Change Square’ in Ṣanʿaʾ was very much self-sufficient. It had restaurants, communal kitchens, schools, a legal council house, sanitary installations, children playgrounds, a hospital, and –

Picture 350: Anti-Ṣāliḥ collage circulating on the internet in June 2011. The president stands in puddles of blood at the ballot box with a qāt filled cheek, wearing a suit in the colors of the US flag. The caricature denounces America’s long silence and backing of the Ṣāliḥ regime.
not to forget – its own qāt markets open 24 hours a day. In the tents, art exhibitions, political awareness seminars and skill-building workshops were held, concerts were given and charity campaigns organized. Many of the tents were equipped with television sets and a wi-fi network connected the protesters with the outside world. Soon an executive body was set up that represented the protesters politically and was in charge of administrative concerns in the camp, the ‘Coordinating Council of the Youth Revolution of Change’ (CCYRC). Each day protests against the regime were staged at the university gates, speeches held demanding the ouster of President Šālih, and marches of a peaceful character organized that often ended in bloodshed as they came under the fire of snipers or encountered thugs in the pay of the regime, armed with clubs and knives. The genesis of a peaceful youth movement that had emerged in Yemen, a country bristling with weapons, fascinated foreign observers. It was the fearlessness and perseverance with which unarmed protesters marched day after day against machine guns, mortars and nerve gas that earned it world-wide respect and the young journalist and pro-democracy activist Tawakkul Karmān its own awareness seminars and skill-building workshops were held, concerts were given and charity campaigns organized. Many of the tents were equipped with television sets and a wi-fi network connected the protesters with the outside world. Soon an executive body was set up that represented the protesters politically and was in charge of administrative concerns in the camp, the ‘Coordinating Council of the Youth Revolution of Change’ (CCYRC). Each day protests against the regime were staged at the university gates, speeches held demanding the ouster of President Šālih, and marches of a peaceful character organized that often ended in bloodshed as they came under the fire of snipers or encountered thugs in the pay of the regime, armed with clubs and knives. The genesis of a peaceful youth movement that had emerged in Yemen, a country bristling with weapons, fascinated foreign observers. It was the fearlessness and perseverance with which unarmed protesters marched day after day against machine guns, mortars and nerve gas that earned it world-wide respect and the young journalist and pro-democracy activist Tawakkul Karmān as its protagonist the Nobel Peace Prize. The Emirates-based National painted an idyllic picture of this brave new world:

“The camp has thrown together Yemenis of all political colors, classes and tribes. Living side-by-side in difficult conditions and constantly attacked by forces loyal to President Ali Abdullah Saleh, they have found ways to settle tribal feuds and other differences to rise above the ethnic, political and geographic fault lines that have existed for years between Yemenis. The carpeted tents have cinder-block walls to keep out rainwater, some have shade plants inside and out, running water from tanks and regular food supplies from political parties and benevolent businessmen. Power generators provide the tents with electricity, a necessity since city power comes on for only an hour or two every day. They gather for the five daily prayers at the university’s mosque complex, most of which has been turned into a hospital. In the early afternoon, many gather to chew qat, a mildly addictive stimulant, debating the future of their country after Mr. Saleh is gone. Many spend their evenings on the internet’s social networks, tweeting about the uprising or posting videos and photographs of the day’s events.”

It was in qāt sessions that tens of thousands of hopeful men and women – mostly in gender separated tents – developed a vision of a new republic. It was here that demands were formulated and that in hours-long debates a consensus for a Yemen after Šālih was built with qāt as a bargaining tool. In April 2011, over 150 youth movements from around the country had elaborated in communal qāt sessions a document entitled “Demands of the Revolution”:

“We affirm that we will continue our peaceful struggle in the squares until we achieve these demands […]. The main demand is to dismiss President Ali Abdullah Saleh and his relatives from their leading positions. The subsequent formation of an interim Presidential Council that should be composed of five civilian members. They must be unanimously chosen and cannot be senior leaders from the former regime. The duties of this Council will include the day-to-day management of the country during the transitional period. Council Members will not be permitted to run as candidates for the posts of President of the Republic or Prime Minister until a full election cycle has passed…”

The activists further called for a new constitution and demanded the dissolution of Parliament, of the Shārā Council and of local councils. The regime rejected these demands as much as calls by the established opposition coalition, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), for Šālih to cede power to vice-president ’Abdu Rabbuh Maš‘ūr Hādī. Yahyā al-Rā’i, a leading official of Šālih’s GPC denounced the JMP’s demands as illusory and as having “been drafted during a qat session”. Protesters laughed at this comment: “Of course they were! Has Yemeni politics ever been thought up anywhere but in qāt sessions?” The majority of protesters in ‘Change Square’ rejected the JMP initiative as not far reaching enough. Also the accords elaborated by the Gulf Cooperation Council and supported by the West which were to grant Šālih immunity from prosecution for any crimes if he left power were hotly debated and finally scrapped in the protesters’ qāt sessions. Despite ever larger crowds taking to the streets, Šālih remained obstinate as became apparent in a speech of May 13:

“Let it be clear that the one who aims and seeks the power, it should be through the elections boxes, and not through killing innocent people, and cutting off roads, and messing with food, water, and fuel and all local economy assets that the Yemeni people are living from […]. Although the JMP is playing
with fire, and is not a political party, but rather a party of troublemakers, we reiterate our call for them to meet and discuss [...] to engage into dialogue under any umbrella and any terms.”

In posters displayed at Change Square and distributed over the internet this ‘ballot box’ theme invoked by President Ṣāliḥ became more and more frequent. As rising numbers of protesters fell victim to attacks by the regime’s forces, images of Ṣāliḥ standing in puddles of blood and on heaps of skulls at the ballot box were circulated, his cheek often swollen with qāṭ (see e.g. picture 350). Tents in Change Square were henceforth decorated with an ever growing number of portraits of men and women killed by the security forces. Qāṭ was always in the first row in the confrontations. Photos of protestors went around the world, having painted their faces in Yemen’s national colors like American Indians on the warpath – with dangerously bulging cheeks. In March 2011, al-Jazeera showed pictures of wounded activists with blood stained clothes and battered limbs, holding on tightly to qāṭ bags and sticking the bitter leaves into mouths contorted with pain.791

The ongoing protests and increasing violence widened the rifts within the Sanḥān clan, the Ḥashid tribal federation and the army which had for decades been the basis of power of the Ṣāliḥ regime. They had emerged over the past years not last as a result of the Ṣa‘da war and the question of President Ṣāliḥ’s succession (see chapter VIII. E). When on March 18th 53 protesters were killed by snipers, General ‘Ali Muḥṣin al-‘Almar, a Sanḥān kinsman of the president and Commander of the
First Armored Division revoked his support for Ṣālīḥ and vowed to henceforth protect the protesters. His troops occupied a large area of northwestern Ṣan‘ā’, extending from the ‘Kentucky Junction’ on Zubayrí Street along the Ring Road and Há’il Street north to Ṣan‘ā’ University and from there to Madhbāḥ, al-Imān University and to the Ṣan‘ā’ radio station. The de-facto split of the city in several spheres of influence with trenches being dug and barricades being erected in many neighborhoods had all the potential for escalation into full-fledged civil war. The prolonged unrest and the hardship suffered by many residents of the embattled areas had a profound influence on chewing habits. While some people chose to reduce their qāṭ consumption due to the financial strain the economic crisis had put on them, many who had not used qāṭ before the outbreak of hostilities or who had chewed only occasionally now took up the habit on a regular basis to better cope with the psychological pressures and the enormous emotional drain. Khāṭṭāb al-Ḥimyāri, media officer for the al-Najāt Foundation for Fighting Qāṭ said that as people resorted more and more “to qat to forget their problems and concerns”, the NGO had to stop all its activities. In vain the foundation had tried to raise awareness on the dangers of qāṭ, the NGO had tried to raise awareness on the dangers of qāṭ during the first months of the uprising, but the protesters were not willing to listen or to take part in any campaigns as they “have a deep conviction that qat keeps protesters at the sit-ins and makes them more steadfast.” Qaḥṭān al-Asbaḥī of USAID’s Responsive Governance Project observed that chewing had become an even more common social activity during the crisis:

“Few were seen chewing solitary in these days of rage, neither on the opposition side, nor among Ṣālīḥ’s supporters. Even those indifferent of politics now took part in communal qāṭ chews to vividly discuss the protests and the wave of revolutions in the Arab world. Until the power cuts paralyzed the country this was often done in front of a TV, watching al-Jazeera news. With the electricity crisis as of March and the absence of TV news, chewing gatherings became even more important for the exchange of information. Everyone could contribute his part to these discussions about what he had heard or seen. Initially, even the heavy street fighting in the northern parts of Ṣan‘ā’ could not stop these get-togethers. In this situation in either political camp no one would have dared to question the use of qāṭ or to lobby against the crop. This would have been a killing issue for the political process.”

Tribesmen Take Control of Northern Ṣan‘ā’

In late February 2011, the leaders of the Ḥashid and Bakīl federations summoned tens of thousands of tribesmen in ‘Arān to discuss the stance the tribes were to take towards the protests. They decided to join the revolution. One of the leaders of Ḥashid, Shaykh Ḥusayn bin ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥimār, son of the late Shaykh ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥimār, declared his resignation from the GPC at the ‘Arān gathering to protest against the regime’s violent repression of the protests: “I’m announcing my resignation from the ruling party, a party of corruption, and will be joining the revolution of the young people until this regime is toppled.” Many tribesmen poured into Ṣan‘ā’ in the following weeks to join the protests – a development not to the liking of all the urban activists, who feared their revolution could be ‘hijacked’ by al-‘Īṣālī and the tribes. When on May 22, Ṣālīḥ refused to sign a GCC brokered transition agreement heavy clashes broke out in Ṣan‘ā’ between tribal fighters loyal to ʿĀdīq al-Ḥimār, paramount shaykh of Ḥashid, and government troops. Large parts of the al-Ḥaṣaba neighborhood were devastated in the street fighting that ensued after President Ṣālīḥ ordered al-Ḥimār’s arrest. Mortar and artillery fire destroyed the palace of al-Ḥimār, the Yemenia tower and parts of the Ministry of Water and Environment. Dozens of tribal fighters and government troops were killed, bringing the country to the brink of civil war. Shaykh al-Ḥimār’s men, supported by armored vehicles of the renegade First Armored Brigade were able to occupy the Saba news agency, the GPC headquarters, the Ministry of Interior, and the headquarters of Ṣan‘ā’’s water utilities.

The government reacted by cutting the electricity and water supply of the al-Ḥaṣaba area and closed a number of major qāṭ markets across the city to avoid large gatherings that could be a threat to security. All markets in the neighborhoods around the Presidential Palace were closed, notably in the
Saba’in area, in al-Ṣāfiya, Bayt Mi’yād, al-ʿAṣbah, Shumayla, and Ḥadda. Ṭanṭān al-ʿAṣbah reported on June 3rd by phone to the author:

“Qāṭ markets near other strategic locations have also been closed down, such as the Thawra market in Ḥassaba that is located not far from on the Airport Road and the Ministries of Interior and Electricity. Since yesterday no one is allowed anymore to enter Ṣanʿā’. Security forces are trying to seal off the city as Ḥāshid tribesmen attempt to enter the capital to come to the aid of Shaykh al-ʿAḥmar, who is attacked and besieged by troops loyal to President Sālīḥ. Also all qāṭ shipments were stopped and qāṭ on sale in the city was much reduced. Only qāṭ grown within the city limits such as Ḍīlah from Shamlān and Wādī Zahr and a few other varieties were found. This is the first time ever that qāṭ is stopped from entering Ṣanʿā’. Qāṭ prices went up immediately, especially as the regime bought much of the little qāṭ available in the city for its elite troops defending the presidential palace and other important locations. Already a few days ago qāṭ from the western regions such as al-Ḥayma and Harāz had disappeared from the markets due to heavy fighting on the Ṣanʿā’-al-Ḥudayda road between government troops and the al-Ḥayma tribes, who tried to enter the city in order to join the anti-Sālīḥ forces.”

On the same day the presidential palace came under attack. The mosque in the highly secured compound in southern Ṣanʿā’ was the target of a bombing, killing several government officials and severely wounding dozens of high ranking members of the regime, including the Prime Minister, his

Picture 352: Website of the al-ʿAḥmar clan.
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deputy, the President of the Shura Council, the Governor of Şan’a and ‘Ali ‘Abd Allah Şaliḥ himself. The President was much more seriously wounded than initially disclosed. With a shrapnel wound near his heart, a collapsed lung and burns on over 40% of his body he was flown to Saudi Arabia for treatment the following day under the cheers of protesters. Vice President ‘Abdu Rabbuḥ Maṣṣūr Ḥadī took over as acting commander in chief and president. Şaliḥ’s son, his nephew and his half-brother remained however in their strategic positions as heads of the Special Guard, the Political Security Organization and the air force. Şaliḥ would return to Yemen on September 23 after three months of treatment, destroying the hopes of many pro-democracy activists for change.

The Fuel Shortage and its Impact on the Economy and on Qät Consumption

In March 2011, the oil pipeline linking the Mārib production sites with the Red Sea had been bombed, cutting the flow of crude oil exports by an estimated 125,000 barrels/day through the Raʾs ‘Isā terminal near al-Hudayda. Consequently, several foreign petroleum companies had to suspend their operations. Also, the Aden refinery could no longer be supplied with crude oil, so it had to halt its gasoline and diesel production for the first time since the 1993 civil war. This led a serious fuel shortage across Yemen and put into motion a spiraling of prices and the emergence of a black market. In June, a liter of gasoline was sold for YR 500 as compared to a pre-crisis price of YR 75. At gas stations several kilometer long vehicle queues formed with drivers waiting for fuel for up to five days. In June, Saudi Arabia came to Yemen’s relief by granting the country three million barrels of crude oil that were delivered to the Aden refinery. Also power lines from the Mārib gas turbine to Şan’a suffered repeated attacks so that the power situation in the capital deteriorated with electricity coming on for as little as one or two hours a day. As the Mārib-Şan’a highway was cut by the unrest in Nihm district, deliveries of cooking gas also came to a halt. While the government accused tribes affiliated to al-‘Īlah and the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) of sabotage, the opposition accused the government of deliberately “torturing” the population with power cuts and shortages of fuel and cooking gas so that it would call for the return of President Şaliḥ and put pressure on the revolutionaries to end their rebellion.

The fuel and electricity crisis paralyzed most sectors of Yemen’s economy. Some 800 industrial plants – 75-80% of Yemen’s factories – had to suspend their work or operated at a much reduced capacity. Also many small businesses operated on the verge of collapse. They received their wares only erratically, could no longer cool them, had to sell them at exorbitant prices or had to shut their shops at nightfall due to the blackouts. By June 2011, an estimated 150,000 workers had lost their jobs and by October it was believed that unemployment had reached 60%. The lack of electricity and medication also led to the breakdown of many healthcare services. In November 2011, the government reported that the 10-month political crisis had lost Yemen’s economy more than US$ 10 billion. According to the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, imports dropped by 80% following the start of the fuel crisis with severe repercussions for Yemen as a country importing some 90% of its goods. Spreading insecurity, the deterioration of the riyal exchange rate as well as the increasing reluctance of exporters to dispatch wares on credit to a crisis country were to blame.

Furthermore, the agricultural sector was severely affected by the crisis. Many farmers lost their crops as they could not obtain diesel to run their pumps for irrigation or as they could no longer afford to buy the ever more expensive fuel. Farmers not owning wells and being dependent on water deliveries suffered as prices for trucked water (10 m³) increased from YR 1,200 in January 2011 to YR 10,000 by June that year. Consequently, some 90% of farmers in the al-Hudayda area reported in mid-2011 to have ceased farming activities. As the transport sector was badly affected by fuel bottlenecks and by frequent roadblocks, a much diminished availability of agricultural products in the markets and sharp price increases were the result. By October 2011, prices for potatoes and tomatoes had increased by 200% and 300%, respectively. Prices for wheat flour were up by 41% and rice and bread prices had increased by about 50%. Cooking gas cylinders – when indeed they could be found – were sold at 170% more than their official price. Even before the start of the ‘Youth Revolution’
over a third of Yemen’s population did not have enough to eat – as IRIN points out – but diminished access to water and food greatly exacerbated the nutritional situation. By mid-2011, 43% of households were reported to regularly skip meals to cope with escalating food prices. According to WFP many vulnerable families turned to qat to stem hunger pains.807 Having carried out a survey in al-Hudayda governorate in July 2011, Oxfam reported that a fifth of respondents had lost their jobs since the start of the political upheaval and that 52% faced decreased incomes. 19% of families had to withdraw their children from school so that they could find work to support the family. 64% of households had resorted to skipping meals and 29% borrowed money to survive.808

With diesel prices escalating, many farmers of the highlands simply stopped irrigating crops of low or marginal profitability and shifted their resources entirely towards irrigating qat that even during the crisis promised high returns. This further increased food insecurity in Yemen. While many rural communities could no longer secure their food and water needs or had to cope with contaminated water for drinking purposes, the high returns of qat permitted farmers to purchase diesel on the black market and regularly irrigate their fields with clean groundwater. In the time of most severe fuel bottlenecks, qat farmers also benefitted from the qualities of their ‘wonder crop’. The drought resistance of qat helped them overcome the diesel shortage, while farmers of vegetables or fruits lost their yields once they had to suspend irrigation. While the latter would have to wait for the next agricultural season to make any profits, qat farmers could simply start irrigating their fields again, once they had secured fuel. Within a few weeks time they could produce marketable qat leaves again. As the Yemen Post pointed out in an article entitled “A nation subdued by qat”, “qat producers managed to absorb the increased cost of diesel […] because their margin of profit is so high”. Reducing their profits to some extent and not passing on increased production cost to consumers helped them to keep the market for qat stable.809 Another factor that kept the qat sector in balance was that many Yemenis were willing to reduce their food intake and subsist on bread and yoghurt for a time, but were not willing to cut down on qat, as the Yemen Post notes:

“Well more people losing their jobs everyday nationwide as more businesses either closed down or downsized their operations, Yemenis had to face a serious cash flow problem. With no to little income per family, many families have been reported to go hungry by humanitarian organizations […]. But if Yemenis did do with less, qat was not on the list of things to give up, quite the opposite in fact. In the most bizarre twist, Yemenis started to chew more, relying on qat to keep hunger and depression at bay. Qat became the nation’s coping mechanism, a safe haven of sorts where poverty and the threats of war had no sway. And true, with about 50 YER a day, a Yemeni could afford a few hours of oblivion.”

Despite the precarious supply situation, the collapse of the public water and electricity supply and the deterioration of health and educational services, the daily supply of qat remained ensured. The qat supply was even kept up in the combat zones of Ṣan‘ā’ city. In the afternoons government snipers would reportedly leave their hideouts to gather at the markets to buy qat.811 In April 2011, Ḥaḍṭan al-�数f, a former Director of the Central Water Monitoring Unit (MAI), reported the following from Ṣan‘ā’:

“Nothing is working here anymore, but qat works fine. We have no vegetables left in the markets, but qat is everywhere. We have no cooking gas, no petrol, restaurants are closed, the roads to some governorates are cut off. Ṣan‘ā’ is divided between conflicting parties, many agencies have stopped working, no traffic system. Everything is a mess with no hope of improving. But qat markets are open and chewing has not decreased despite many people having lost their sources of income. Indeed the qat business is going well these days, prices are cheaper than earlier, but many qat sellers have reduced the size of qat bundles. It seems easier for buyers to accept smaller bunches at the same price as before than bunches of the same size at higher prices. All qat varieties are available, qat even comes from ‘Amrīn and Ṣa‘da with good low prices despite the fighting. Qat is again going to Socotra Island without any control.”

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In August Volker Mantel of Media Design-Şan’a’ reported from the Yemeni capital:

“Qat prices have been quite stable during the past months in Şan’a’, even when the fuel crisis was at its worst. Prices have dropped in early August to as much as a third of the previous level as the rainy season has set in. While a bundle of good quality qat was sold for YR 3,000 in July, it is now sold for YR 1,000. When we drove through Şan’a’ after ifţár yesterday, we saw scores of soldiers of all political camps sitting in the streets chewing. Also at the roadblocks where the hostile troops are facing each other everyone is chewing. There is shooting everywhere, but in qat markets business is as usual. Qat comes from all parts of the country, even from Arţab where the government is now launching operations against the tribes. There is also qat from Şa’da, but its quality is low. Ḥawrāḥi rebels walk freely in the city now, there are no more laws in Şan’a’.”

A Yemen Post commentator summed up the country’s situation in October 2011: “As illogical as it might sound for many, qat is about the only thing that hasn’t changed in Yemen, in spite of the deaths, the political, economic, industrial, power, and employment crisis.”

Picture 353: With Şan’a’ being besieged by anti-Ṣāliḥ tribesmen in May and June 2011, qat could no longer reach the city from beyond the security perimeter and was soon in short supply. Here a beleaguered qat seller’s car at the southern gates of the capital in Sanhān.

Revolting Against Qat and Other ‘Little Dictators’

In late 2011, the revolution went into a second phase. After having initially been directed against Ṣāliḥ and his 33-year rule, it now also targeted the “little dictators” – his wider entourage and his clients in what was dubbed the “parallel revolution”. In December 2011, low-ranking airmen went on a several month strike demanding the replacement of Major General Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ, half-brother of the ousted president (the general was replaced on April 7, 2012). At the same time protests were staged against General ‘Ali al-Shaṭīr, head of the Moral Guidance Authority of Yemen’s armed forces, whom
soldiers accused of corruption. Also the Saba news agency was rocked by protests against its chairman Ṭāriq al-Shāmī, who served simultaneously as spokesperson of Ṣāliḥ’s GPC. In the Yemen TV Channel a fist fight erupted in late December that routed out its director Ḥusayn BāṢālim, who had announced that those employees who had visited the protesters’ camp at ‘Change Square’ would be fired. On December 28, employees of the Political Security Organization denied their head of finance access to the PSO premises demanding his sacking due to allegations of corruption. Unrest in government institutions quickly spread to other large Yemeni cities. Also in al-Hudaydah civil servants staged protests and demanded the replacement of the heads of the Traffic Department, the Electricity Company, the Naval Academy and the Oil Company, all of whom they accused of corruption.

In early January 2012, Yemeni activists decided that qāt should be ranked among the ‘little dictators’ and called for a “revolution on one’s self”. Qāt, they declared, was “as great a menace to Yemen’s progress as decades of government corruption and misrule, and even harder to topple than Saleh”. On January 12, 2012, thousands of people followed the boycott campaign entitled “A Day Without Qāt”. The event was kicked off a week earlier by Hind al-Iryāni through Twitter and Facebook. Over social media channels the Lebanon-based blogger had voiced her belief that changing Yemen’s qāt habit would be “a crucial step to achieving political change.” Initially, the campaign attracted foremost members of the Yemeni Diaspora living in Sweden and Great Britain, the United States or Canada. Via the internet they shared studies and articles on qāt, cartoons and news clips, and started to engage in a competition for designing awareness materials that could be displayed and distributed in a prospective street campaign. Among these was an artwork by Wijdān al-Junayd entitled “Since I love Yemen and its land, I will stop chewing qāt for one day.”

It depicted a jawbone in Yemen’s national colors and in the country’s shape. From the row of teeth spilled the water wasted by qāt farming. Another illustration by Fawzi Yalhā that was widely circulated on the internet recalled a pirate flag and was entitled “Say No to Qāt”. Under a skull wearing a fine Yemeni turban two bunches of qāt twigs were arranged like crossbones (see pictures 448 & 449). When the campaign was endorsed by Yemen’s Nobel Peace Prize winner Tawakkul Karman, the Yemeni news channel Sihayl (run by Shaykh Ḥamīd al-Ḫāmīr), and by Muḥammed Abū Luhūm, a key opposition politician, the idea of a qāt boycott day gained ground in the protest camps of Ṣan’a’ and Ta’izz. According to some media even Vice-President ‘Abdu Rabbuh Ṭaṣḥīḥ Hāḍī, who would replace Ṣāliḥ as Yemen’s president a month later, had lent his hand to the campaign.

On Thursday, January 12 – the start of the Yemeni weekend – and thus the main day of weekly chewing, activists of the Coordinating Council of the Youth Revolution of Change barred the access to the protest camps for qāt chewers. ‘Change Square’ of Ṣan’a’ and ‘Freedom Square’ of Ta’izz were decorated with the anti-qāt posters that had been produced by online campaigners. Leaflets and headbands with anti-qāt slogans were distributed. In Ta’izz, protesters visited qāt markets disseminating anti-qāt messages via loudspeaker to discourage customers from buying qāt. Anti-qāt activists collected diverse video testimonies from people following the boycott call and uploaded them on youtube. Many of the interviewed declared that they perceived qāt as dangerous to their country as dictatorship. One activist blamed outgoing President Ṣāliḥ for deliberately spreading the qāt culture to all areas of Yemen “to drive people away from politics”. The introduction to the video clip outlined the creed of the young activists that is reminiscent of a constitution:

We the people of Yemen have proven to the world that we are capable of change!
And we all know that the qāt plant is harming our way of life.
So we are calling to every Yemeni to stop chewing qāt for one day on January 12.
And we are telling the world, we the people of Yemen love our beloved country!
And we seek change.

The Yemen Observer wrote with enthusiasm that campaigners were “looking at bringing forward a new image for Yemen, brighter and full of hope, set on building a modern civil state”. The campaign received media attention far beyond the Arab World, with print and online articles...
appearing in South Africa and Canada. TV and radio documentations were aired in Germany and India. Beyond the protest squares and beyond the circles of Yemeni intellectuals the campaign had little real effect. Most qât sellers interviewed on the boycott day across Šan‘ā‘ declared they had not heard of the event and that their sales were normal. Only in the immediate vicinity of the protest camps, qât merchants reported that their turnover was down by half.


Anti-qât activists were quite realistic about options of change, saying that it would be impossible to ban qât. But they expressed the hope that consumption could be reduced citing as a good example the PDRY’s qât law that had limited chewing to weekends. Wafā‘ al-Walidī, one of the initiators of the campaign in Ta‘izz, believed that the campaign against qât “was launched at the perfect time. People who had given up on the prospect of change had their spirits lifted.” Indeed the campaign boosted the ego of anti-qât activists, created new alliances and new forms of mobilization. The online documentation of the campaign was visited by tens of thousands of internet users within just a few days showing impressively how powerful new media can be utilized for awareness-raising. Yemen-born Hind al-Iryānī who had sparked the campaign from her Beirut domicile was astonished over the great resonance her online call had triggered: She believes the campaign was so successful because...
many organizations that were against qat seized the opportunity to relaunch the debate on qat that had been silenced by the revolution:

“I have never seen Yemenis talk about qat like they did during the campaign. I never planned for any campaign, but [now] we are trying to include a lesson about qat in school curriculums that talks about its negative impact on the economy, agriculture and health. We are hoping that the new minister in Yemen will listen to our request in light of the ongoing changes.”

Shortly after the boycott day the Yemeni qat protestor community set another ambitious target for action – April 12 was declared as a day to rally “Towards Government Offices Without Qat.” Yemen’s new government endorsed the campaign, after the anti-qat activists were seconded by the British Government and al-Jazeera. In mid-March 2012, Alan Duncan, the British Minister of International Development had visited Yemen and emphasized the need of a clear economic program supported by the IMF for a country with staggering poverty levels reaching 42%. In an interview with Alarabiya TV, Duncan declared that it was difficult to improve Yemen’s situation “in light of the absence of economic planning”, noting that the “focus must shift from the cultivation of Qat to food crops”. Only a week later well known al-Jazeera talk show host Faysal al-Qasim, harshly criticized Yemenis for qat chewing. His brusque confrontation of his Yemeni guests with the question “how do you want to develop while you are under the narcotic effect of qat 24 hours a day”, sparked anger in Yemen. Some days later ‘Ali al-’Amran, Yemen’s new Minister of Minister of Information instructed various national media corporations by written order to cooperate with the “Shabab bi-lā Qāt Association” in its April 12 campaign and agree on coverage, air time and broadcasting discussion sessions.

The government-run daily al-Thawra reported intensively on the campaign and its aims. In several articles it cited recent scientific studies on qat and interviewed physicians, agronomists and economists on the hazards of qat. Many newspapers published drawings by Yemen’s leading cartoonists, such as ‘Adn Muḥāqīr, ‘Iṣām Ṭalāl or Muḥammad al-Shaybānī, who had sharpened their pens against the drug.

The campaign entitled “The Beginning of Change – Public Facilities Without Qat” centered on Yemen’s larger cities Ṣan‘a’, Ibb, Ta’izz, al-Ḥudaydah and Aden where activists of youth organizations and anti-qat NGOs distributed fliers, posters and brochures in government facilities to thousands of civil servants. In Ṣan‘a’, employees of the Ministries of Information, Education, Electricity, Health and Agriculture were targeted as well as servicemen and employees in police stations, army barracks, post offices, public schools and hospitals. Awareness was also raised in qat markets of Ṣan‘a’ and Ta’izz and qat merchants willingly put up anti-qat posters in their shops, not in the least concerned for their trade and not believing that the campaign could have a lasting effect. A Ṣan‘a’ qat dealer sitting under a campaign poster in his Baghdād Street sales booth told the press confidently: “This green plant will never be affected by anything and it will remain in the Yemeni blood.” Also this campaign was supported by Yemen’s Nobel Peace Prize winner Tawakkul Karman, as well as the country’s former ambassador to the Arab League, ‘Abd al-Malik Manṣūr, and Dr. ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ashwal, Yemen’s Minister of Education. The latter promised that qat awareness would henceforth be included in school curricula in Ṣan‘a’ and soon also in Ta’izz. ‘Umar Al-Ḥīmyārī, a campaign member and Ṣan‘a’ lawyer drafted a law banning qat in government facilities hoping that this could increase pressure on the government to act on qat. The campaign was concluded in Ṣan‘a’’s Cultural Center, one of Yemen’s few large theater halls. Here a concert was given, theater plays presented, a children’s song contest held and a break dance performance by young musicians given. Also a number of qat awareness films of the Social Fund for Development were shown, among them a film teaching good conduct for civil servants (see pictures 355 & 356). The campaign could be called a success, but its organizers were disappointed that none of the high ranking government representatives who had promised to come had attended the closing event.
Pictures 355 & 356: Numerous anti-qät films were presented on April 12, 2012, the day of “Public Facilities Without Qät”. Here scenes from a film showing bad and good conduct of civil servants. While the fellow in the lower scene is vividly working and has a well arranged archive, the fellow in the clip above is chewing qät. He sits on a cushion below his empty desk amidst randomly scattered folders.
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720 Yemen Observer, Dec. 15, 2010 (“Yemen to host the second International Conference for the Arab Coffee”) and Yemen Observer, Dec. 21, 2010 (“Conference discusses plans to rebuild Yemen’s coffee industry”).
722 See chapter VIII. I.
723 Personal communications with Salman Rashid, Shan’a, Jan. 15, 2005.
724 Red for the bloodshed of martyrs and a revolutionary spirit, white for hope and a brighter future, and black for the country’s dark past.
725 Hämäläinen in his “Yemen Handbuch” (1989, p. 112) wrongly described the coffee tree in the 1 riyal bill as being qat.
726 Only one postal stamp issued in the PDRY on Dec. 20, 1989 for the Inter-Parliamentary Centenary (value 300 fils) depicting the coffee plant has come to the attention of the author.
727 Entitled “Münz-Brief” in German, this card that was postmarked on May 1, 1988 in Shan’a contains an original 1 riyal coin and a stamp showing Bab al-Yaman (25 Fils). The “Münz-Brief” for South Yemen, issued on Jan. 21, 1990, shows Aden port, the al-Aydar Mosque and a tribesman with a Mauser rifle.
729 Personal communications with ‘Abd al-Rahman Marhum, then Vice Minister of Planning, April 3, 2000.
730 The Guardian, Mar. 6, 2006 (“Chewing the qat”).
733 Mu’assasat al-‘af fiyya 2003, p. 2305 f.
734 Varisco 1986, p. 10.
735 Personal communications under condition of anonymity. Shan’a, May 18, 2005.
736 The original being Al-imân yamân wa al-ḥikma yamânîyya (Belief is Yemeni and so is wisdom).
740 The hallucinatory hagigat pills (or also hagig GAT, a compound word of the Hebrew hagiga (celebration) and qât) were prohibited in Israel in 2004 after the occurrence of several cases of poisoning attributed to this drug.
741 The pills are said to contain the active ingredients cathinone, methcathinone, cathine, and amphetamines.
742 The Guardian, June 15, 2008 (“Conservatives will ban khat”).
743 Baladî, long qât branches of arm’s length.
746 Yemen Times, May 1, 2008 (“As government approves Socotra plants as national symbols”).
750 See e.g. Yemen Today Magazine, Nov. 19, 2010 (“National dialogue aims to address Yemen’s woes”).
751 Al-Ḥamdî, former President of Yemen assassinated in 1977 and ‘Umar, Yemeni socialist leader, assassinated in 2002.
752 See e.g. Yemen Observer, Feb. 3, 2011 (“Yemen’s pro, anti government rallies end peacefully”).
753 Reuters via The Irish Times, Jan. 27, 2011 (“Yemenis in anti-president protest”).
754 Aired on Yemen’s national television at 7:20 p.m. local time.
756 BBC, Feb. 3, 2011 (“Yemen protests: 20,000 call for President Saleh to go”)
757 Yemen Observer, Jan. 24, 2011 (“Yemen is not like Tunisia, President Saleh”).
758 Reuters, Feb. 10, 2011 (“Qat addiction may stem Yemen protests”) and Haaretz, Feb. 10, 2011 (“Narcotic plant addiction may be stemming Yemen protests”).
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Personal communications with government counterparts. See also Yemen Observer, Feb. 3, 2011 ("Yemen's pro, anti government rallies end peacefully"). Although many managed to call in sick, excuse themselves, or otherwise slip away unnoticed.

Personal communications, Şan’a, Feb. 16, 2011.

Author’s interviews with Şāliḥ supporters at Tahrir Square, Feb. 11-16, 2011.


Personal communications with campaign organizers and government counterparts, Şan’a, Feb. 2011.

Reuters, Jan. 27, 2011 ("Yemenis in anti-president protest").


Yemen Observer, Feb. 22, 2011 ("Demonstrations in Yemen create businesses").

Yemen Observer, Apr. 12, 2011 ("Who spoiled the new invention in Yemen?").

An observer speaking on condition of anonymity, May 11, 2011.

A stiff paste made from sorghum flour and water, eaten with meat broth, porridge, or honey and ghee.

Personal communications with Qaḥṭān Yahyā al-Asbaḥi, Şan’a, Apr. 3, 2011.

Personal communications at the protesters camp at Şan’a University gate (‘Change Square’), Feb. 15, 2011.

Personal communications with Qaḥṭān Yahyā al-Asbaḥi, Şan’a, Feb. 17, 2011.


Haaretz, Feb. 10, 2011 ("Narcotic plant addiction may be stemming Yemen protests").


This was observed in the large markets of Ḥadda, al-Ḥasaba, Shumayla and the Sūq ‘Ans.

Personal communications with demonstrators having come to Şan’a from Aden and al-Mukalla and with national staff of an international donor agency based in Aden, speaking on condition of anonymity, Şan’a, Feb. 17, 2011.

Yemen Observer, Feb. 20, 2011 ("Protests take a peaceful turn in Yemen").

Personal communications, April 24, 2011.

Personal communications with Qaḥṭān Yahyā al-Asbaḥi, Mar. 11, 2011.

The National (Emirates), Oct. 25, 2011 ("Islamists exerting increasing control at Yemen protest camp").


See e.g. Yemen Post, Oct. 16, 2011 ("Fresh clashes rock the capital, Sana’a").

The National, Oct. 25, 2011 (see above).

See e.g. AP, Nov. 16, 2011 ("Change Square seeks to be genesis for a new Yemen") and Yemen Post, Oct. 4, 2011 ("Yemen: A nation subdued by qat").

Yemen Times, April 28, 2011 ("Young independent protesters plan escalation").

Yemen Observer, Apr. 6, 2011 ("Yemen President forms national leadership committee").

AP, Nov. 16, 2011 ("Change Square seeks to be genesis for a new Yemen").

Broadcast of his speech on the National Yemen TV Program, May 13, 2011.

Al-Jazeera news coverage on Yemen’s protests, Mar. 12, 2011.

BBC News, Apr. 14, 2011 ("Yemen protesters show unity and determination").

Yemen Times, Jul. 3, 2011 ("Qat consumption up or down?").

Personal communications, April 22, 2011.


AP, May 26, 2011 ("Yemen’s president vows to resist ‘failed state’ as tribes press offensive against regime").

Voice of America, May 24, 2011 ("Yemeni tribesmen take control of government buildings in Sana’a").


CNN, June 8, 2011 ("Witnesses: Tribal fighters take over major city in Yemen").

Xinhua, Oct. 7, 2011 ("Yemen oil export pipeline blown up...") and Reuters, May 9, 2011 ("Nexen output cut on Yemen"). Despite being repaired and crude exports temporarily taken up again, the pipeline was blown up several more times during 2011.


Yemen Observer, June 30, 2011 and Yemen Times, Sep. 12, 2011 ("Confusion, desperation surround fuel and power shortages").

Yemen Post, Tuesday, 26, July, 2011 (“Civil unrest impacting severely on children’s wellbeing in Yemen”).


Oxfam 2011, p. 7 and 8.


AFP, Dec. 1, 2011 (“Tension grips Yemen capital despite Saleh sealing exit deal”).

Personal communications by telephone, April 22, 2011.

Personal communications by telephone Aug. 21, 2011.

Yemen Post, Oct. 16, 2011 (“Fresh clashes rock the capital, Sana’a”).

From Yemeni friends the author heard the opposite: Bāṣalim was more on the protest side, had resigned and/or was kicked out by the Ṣāliḥ regime, but was later reinstated by ‘Āli al-‘Āmrānī, Minister of Information of the conciliation government.


The National (Emirates), Jan. 13, 2012 (“Yemen campaign urges ‘A Day without Qat’”).


Yemen Observer, Jan. 17, 2012 (“Campaign in Yemen to revolt against qat”).

E.g. Deutschlandradio, Jan. 14, 2012 (“Boykott-Tag im Jemen gegen Volksdroge Qat”)


The National, Jan 13, 2012.

The Arab Digest, Jan. 16, 2012 (“The Yemeni woman who brought change ... from her Beirut laptop!”)


Yemen Post, Mar. 25, 2012 (“Governmental institutions without qat campaign”).

The order that was signed on Mar. 31 and dated April 1, was addressed to the General Media Corp., SABA’, al-Thawra, al-Jumhūriyya, 14 October, and Bā Kathīr.

Al-Thawra published several articles on April 11 and 12, e.g. al-Thawra, Apr. 11, 2012 (“Ghadan yawm bi-lā qāt fi-l-mu‘assasat al-ḥukumiyya”) and Apr. 12 (“Al-yawm ... bi-lā qāt”).

See e.g. film clip: youtube.com/watch?v=TVu3DOMYtzg&feature=related (consulted Apr. 14, 2012).

Yemen Times, Apr. 16, 2012 (“Activists struggle to ban qat chewing in public facilities”).

Yemen Post, Apr. 17, 2012 (“Campaign of Yemen without qat continues in Yemen”).

CNN.com, Apr. 12, 2012 (“Let’s learn to go without qat, say Yemenis”). See also Yemen Post, Apr. 12, 2011 (“Yemen economy will improve after uprising - expect economists”).

See e.g. film clip: youtube.com/watch?v=Fvl.Pn8Ueq8&feature=related (consulted Apr. 17, 2012).

See e.g. film clip: youtube.com/watch?v=1u2dAmGPeY&feature=email (consulted Apr. 13, 2012).

Yemen Times, Apr. 16, 2012 (“Activists struggle to ban qat chewing in public facilities”).
Picture 357: A qūr harvesting crew in Hamdān. The jambiyya hilt comes in handy to attach the small plastic bags filled with tender Hamdān ‘qaṣal’ leaves.