Hashish

By JONAS ROELLIN

The rapper Kafon awakes slowly from a daytime nap on a featureless grey rooftop covered with nothing but a few TV satellite dishes. Still drowsy, but with a clear grin on his face, he starts rocking his afroed head to a beginning reggae-inspired drumbeat. In the next scene, the musician sits on a golden throne-like chair, surrounded by a cloud of smoke and chants: “Enough with getting high / you made me crazy / I lie to myself / tomorrow I will roll [a joint] again” (KAFON).

The video clip of the song “Enough with getting high” (*shikha yezīnī*) is released on YouTube in May and within months reaches millions of views. While the song describes the downsides of intoxication (*shikha*) only in ironic terms, it praises the pleasures and funs of it without restraint [[↑Inferiority = Superiority \(Satire\)](#)]. Kafon’s song about “*zaṭla*”, the cannabis resin also known as “hashish”, is only one further hit song about young people’s favourite drug in post-revolutionary Tunisia. In addition to Kafon, several Tunisian rappers are popular for their *zaṭla* anthems [[↑Celebrities](#)]. Take for example Hamzaoui MED AMINE and KLAY BBJ whose post-revolutionary song “Bring me a [hashish] bar I love *zākātākā*” is a cult song among cannabis-aficionados this year. Using numerous coded words that refer to the world of cannabis consumption (f.ex. “*zākātākā*” meaning “*zaṭla*”), they rap about the causes for it, how it has become widespread and describe the intimate atmosphere that surrounds their *zaṭla* gatherings. In fact, as the Tunisian blogger Leila Bezzine (Laylā biz-Zayn) writes in her blog on June 20 ironically, “talk of *zaṭla*, women, sex and ‘garbage in a trashcan’ (*zebla fī pūbelā*) by using curse words, then post them on your Facebook profile or YouTube channel and you will be as famous as Kafon and Balti [another Tunisian rapper]” (BEZZINE).

The popularity of rap and reggae music centered around the theme of *zaṭla* – which can also mean intoxication – reflects the spread of drugs and specifically cannabis consumption among young people in Tunisia. This year, cannabis is by far the most frequently used drug among Tunisian youth. The same is true for Egypt. Of the more than one third of young Egyptians who use drugs, more than three-fourths consume, often exclusively, cannabis which is, as in Tunisia, predominantly smoked in the form of hashish (RABIE et al.). Accordingly, there is also a range of Egyptian songs dedicated to hashish. Many of them are composed in the genre of Electro Chaabi (*electro sha‘bī*), also known as Mahraganat (*mahragānāt*) [[↑Pop Music](#)]. They celebrate hashish gatherings and collective trance with titles such as “Hashish our excess” (*hashīsh farṭnā*, FM) or “Whoever smokes hashish shall raise his hand” (*illī yishrab il-ḥashīsh yirfa‘ ʿīduh*, HOSSAM MUSIC FM). Also, in the Ultra scene of Egyptian and Tunisian football clubs, eulogies for hashish and other drugs are chanted [[↑Football](#)]. For instance, the ULTRA SOUTH WARRIORS who support the football club Espérance Sportive de Tunis, compose a football chant entitled “Hashish and Coke: a rush in my head” (*zaṭla wa-kōkā shikha fī rāsī*) which they post on YouTube early this year. In the same period, the supporters of the rival football club Club Africain sing together in one of their popular chants entitled “Hey government, set me free”:

The boys of the ‘virage’ are kamikaze / you see them marching on in processions / banners and flags of the team / in my head, I am not okay / bar and *zaṭla* in addition to the mug [alcohol] / I am not aware what is happening to me / hey government, set me free / I know that you adore me / if you want a story, you know where you can find me / waiting for you in the ‘virage’ / I don’t care about you, we fear only God the superior (LEADERS CLUBISTES) [↗[“The System” vs. “The People”](#), ↗[Hope vs. Hell](#)].

Not surprisingly, the media regularly report on the dangers of cannabis consumption with such headlines as “This is the impact of cannabis on the health of young people” (*Directinfo*) or “Tunisia: what *zatla* really contains” (HAD). Protests frequently take place with parents and teachers who are worried about the threat the drug poses to the health and the education of their youngsters. On April 18, the online journal *Webdo* reports that women in Kairouan have organized an “anti-Zatla protest march.” According to the radio station *Mosaïque FM*, they call on the Ministry of the Interior to exert greater effort in the fight against this phenomenon noting that a few days ago, a student “committed suicide after using this drug” [↗[Suicide](#)].

While the issue how potentially harmful the use of cannabis/hashish is to the health of young people is a frequent topic in the media and political discussions of both countries, the question why so many youngsters consume the drug in the first place figures less prominently in the official public debates. However, it is dealt with in various background reports, novels, films or in everyday conversation. For instance, a background report published in the American magazine *The New Yorker*, widely shared on Facebook, suggests that “the Arab Spring has given Tunisians the freedom to act on their unhappiness” and that “there was a boom after the revolution – in religion, in drugs, in everything – because of the new freedom,” as a young Tunisian drug addict had it (PACKER). On Facebook, the report is harshly criticized for its apparent simplistic and uninformed views. A young Tunisian academic comments that the American journalist wrote a “hipster-orientalist” piece in a “pseudo-ethnographic style” with “stereotypical characters” [↗[The Suspect Foreigner](#)]. She and other Facebook users criticize, on the one hand, that young Tunisians know themselves very well that in their generation there is widespread “unhappiness” with the current political and social order and that they do not need a renowned American journalist or any other foreign expert to tell them that. The more pertinent question is rather what leads to their “unhappiness” and why for many consuming hashish alleviates that unhappiness so that life appears more bearable or even enjoyable. On the other hand, as the critics point out, there is precisely no “freedom” to consume hashish these days. In Tunisia as well as in Egypt, even smoking a small joint can lead to severe punishment. So, why do so many young Egyptians and Tunisians consume hashish nevertheless?

In an audio documentary about drug use in Cairo, a young hashish consumer explains that he regularly smokes hashish “in the dosage that anyone uses to get by and chill for a bit” (DIRINI). A similar, if more extensive explanation is found in Ahmed Naji’s (Aḥmad Nāgī) novel “Using Life” (*Istikhdām al-ḥayāt*). The book was originally released in 2014 but receives renewed attention this year after the author is convicted by an Egyptian court of “violating public morals” in his writing (VOON) [↗[Court Trials](#), ↗[The Honourable Citizen](#)]. In the book, Naji tells the story of Bassem (Bāsim), a filmmaker in his twenties

who lives in Cairo “where life is one long wait, and the smell of trash [↗**Garbage**] and assorted animal dung hangs about all the time and everywhere” (FORD). Day in, day out, Bassem wanders the city in search of a bit of excitement, smoking hashish or drinking vodka with his friends and embarking on all kinds of sexual adventures with different women. In the controversial chapter 6, which leads to the charges made against Naji, Bassem describes a party scene full of music, cigarettes and hashish:

We stayed up until the morning smoking hash and competing to finish a whole bottle of vodka. I remember seeing the music dissolve into monkeys that clung to the ceiling. There was a blonde German tapping her leg to the beat. Erections popping around the room. A young Palestinian-American, with poor Arabic, talking a lot about racism. Smoke, cigarettes, hashish. And more smoke. (*arablit*)

For young Egyptians and Tunisians likewise, consuming hashish seems to be a means to escape an everyday reality that is experienced at best as monotonous and boring, at worst as oppressive and stifling. By contrast, getting high is experienced as exciting, stimulating and liberating [↗**Freedom vs. Constraint**]. A young Egyptian village dweller who is asked by an anthropologist how he routinely spends his days, how he “kills time,” answers:

The best way is with hashish. When you get high, your worries fly away and are replaced by good thoughts. It’s like living in two worlds, one where you have ideas, your thoughts run freely, you laugh and feel good, and this one we live in. (SCHIELKE)

Not only young people who feel bored and stifled smoke hashish. People of all ages, especially those living a life of hardship and deprivation find some relief in hashish, as an American traveler in Cairo observes:

Cairo, the violent sun can broil the brains of a field worker or tourist, but there is soothing relief in the secret shadows of Cairo’s famous hash cafes. The workers who pick produce in the relentless heat, the cab drivers, the engineers, the rootless young men, the slow-moving old men, all who have the half dollar for the cup of strong tea and a pipeful of rich Lebanese hash, men of all ages come to relax in the forbidden comfort of camaraderie and cannabis in the hash cafes of Cairo. (WHITE)

It is a “forbidden comfort” indeed, and there is no “freedom” to smoke hashish without risking severe punishment. In Egypt, cannabis consumers face a minimum of one year in prison and a fine of at least 1,000 £E. Trafficking or possession of cannabis is punished with up to 25 years of prison. As the use of cannabis, like all other drugs, is strictly forbidden in Egypt and, moreover, this year there has been an increase in repression, young people are careful to only smoke in secret places where no one can see them (MARTINEZ, SCHIELKE). In Tunisia, the situation is similarly grim for cannabis users. However, there are signs that things are changing, if only slowly. In a social awareness video posted on YouTube, journalist and activist Thameur Mekki (Tāmir Makkī) criticizes the Tunisian drug law known as ‘Law 52’ considering it “too repressive towards cannabis consumers because it sentences them to at least one year in prison and a fine of 1000 Tunisian dinars,” concluding that “today, this law has a growing negative social impact and worries numerous national and international organizations” (YT “Loi 52”). In fact, as Ghazi Mrabet (Ghāzī Murābīt), lawyer and founder

of the reform group “The Prisoner 52” (*as-sajīn 52*), which calls for the revision of the law, writes in the collective blog *Nawaat*:

Tunisian prisons are currently filled with young people because of this law. Do you know, for example, that in the *Mornegiyya* prison, here, a few kilometers from Tunis, practically one in two people has been incarcerated for drug use or possession? Do you know that 60 percent of those sentenced to one year in prison and a fine of 1000 dinars are between 18 and 29 years old? What a waste! (MRABET & EL HOUDA BEY) [[↗Prison](#)]

The Tunisian office of *Human Rights Watch* equally slams the “draconian” drug law that was introduced in 1992 during the rule of the now overthrown dictator Ben ‘Alī. On February 2, it publishes a report entitled “All this for a joint: Tunisia’s repressive drug law and a Roadmap for its Reform,” in which it specifies that 5,200 people are currently locked up in Tunisia for smoking or possessing cannabis, nearly a third of all people imprisoned in Tunisia. Based on interviews with 47 Tunisians, it describes arbitrary searches of homes, young Tunisians being beaten and forced to humiliating urine tests by police and overcrowded prisons where simple cannabis users share cells with hardened criminals (HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH).

As for Egypt, it is not known how many people are imprisoned there for drug-related offenses since the authorities do not grant the public access to this sensitive information (MARTINEZ). However, given the high percentage of cannabis users among the youth, the severe drug law, the increased repression as well as the current state of prisons, one can assume that in Egypt there is also a relatively high number of young cannabis consumers in the overcrowded prisons where they hardly benefit from professional addiction treatment but are rather exposed to potentially violent inmates and arbitrary prison guards.

In Tunisia, most cannabis users who are sent to prison are young people from underprivileged backgrounds, a reporter team claims in a TV reportage (YT “One year in prison”). The *France 24 Observers* team visits an unnamed poor neighborhood in Tunis that typically lacks recreational and cultural facilities for young people [[↗‘Ashwā’iyyāt](#)]. There, the reporters encounter a group of neighborhood friends at one of their meeting points: a neglected public field strewn with garbage and waste, with plastic bags stuck in ragged bushes [[↗Garbage](#)], and a few emaciated cats and chickens wandering around. In the background, half-finished brick houses can be seen, the walls of which are covered with crude, scrawled tags. Standing in the dirt with worn-out sneakers, the neighborhood friends openly admit their hashish consumption to the reporters – and use the opportunity to criticize the police: “The police try to stir up trouble for us. If you live in a working-class neighborhood, they automatically assume you take drugs. If the police arrest you for fighting, they do a drugs test.” “Is cannabis just an excuse to arrest you?”, the journalist wants to know. “Yes, of course. They test you even if you haven’t done anything wrong” [[↗The Policeman Criminal](#)].

However, neither in Tunisia nor in Egypt, the harsh law affects only young people from poor neighborhoods. As is revealed in Victor Castanet’s short documentary “Metal Bars for a Hashish Bar,” hashish is consumed in all social strata. The film delves into a hip music club in downtown Tunis [[↗Downtown/Centre-ville](#)] where fashionable young people celebrate and enjoy themselves. “When we smoke hash, it’s like a peaceful day. It’s just for us. We

don't hurt anybody. They don't have the right to just throw us in jail," a young lady at one table says casually. A young man at another table insists: "Everybody smokes hash here in Tunisia. Everybody. But it is a hidden thing. You cannot tell your parents, you cannot tell the police, you cannot tell the government" (*Tunisie: Des barreaux...*) [[↗Freedom vs. Constraint](#)]. Moreover, as a repressive legacy of Ben 'Ali's police state [[↗Past vs. Present](#)], the law would still be used as a pretext to harass and imprison young activists who are critical of the "system", a graffiti artist explains [[↗"The System" vs. "The People"](#)]. It would also serve as a means for the police to extort money from young people. These would, however, mobilize their friends on social media in such a case in order to raise the sum required by the police and thus avoid their arrest [[↗Crowdfunding](#)]. While in Egypt, the harsh drug law is also used as a pretext to harass and arrest young activists or generally proponents of the January 25 revolution (MARTINEZ), the public exposure of such abuses is a much riskier and hence hardly occurring undertaking. There also does not seem to be any substantial movements or campaigns calling for the amendment of the severe drug law under which numerous ordinary cannabis consumers and their families suffer.

In Tunisia, however, in the course of the year, pressure by civil society groups and human rights activists to amend Law 52 grows. The reform group "The prisoner 52" (*as-sajīn 52*) regularly organizes protests in front of the National Assembly in the suburb of Le Bardo in Tunis. Activists of the group say that Law 52 is "destroying lives" and hold up signs that read, "Down with Law 52" or "Our children are not criminals." One female member of the group tells *TunisiaLive* that her son had been imprisoned for a year without trial on suspected drug offences and that "whole families live in a state of horror because of this law" (MEE STAFF) [[↗Disappearances](#)]. In fact, the government has already sent a first draft revision to the law to parliament on December 30, 2015. The proposed changes include abolishing prison terms for first-time drug offenders and reducing the maximum penalty for repeated offenders from five years to one year in prison. But the draft revision remains stalled in parliament (HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH).

While most Tunisians support a relaxation of Law 52, a few call for a more radical change, namely the legalization of cannabis in Tunisia. *Nawaat* publishes two contributions in this spirit. One highlights the economic benefits of a legalized cannabis trade through taxation as a way out of indebtedness (MESTIRI) [[↗Dollar Crisis](#)]. The other even advocates for Tunisia to become a destination for "cannabis tourism" to solve the tourism crisis: "We could sell combined trips with really evocative names like 'Zatla-desert' or 'Jouino on the beach'," the author writes (FIRASFROMTEXAS) [[↗Tourist Resorts](#)]. Not surprisingly, these contributions provoke harsh reactions on the part of readers. One of them comments: "Farewell, principles of morality and health of the citizen. Everything becomes a commodity. If the majority of the people is permanently high, it is very easy to colonize the country" [[↗Hope = Hell \(Dystopia\)](#)].

But even those who support a relaxation of Law 52 are concerned over the impact the relaxation could have on the consumption of drugs in Tunisia. Already on January 15, the *Arab Weekly* estimates that a law revision would increase the number of drug users among young people considering that a third of them are unemployed and most live in urban districts that lack functioning sport and culture facilities. Moreover, apart from one rehabilitation

centre in Sfax that is barely operating due to financial problems, there would be a lack of treatment services for drug addicts (GHANMI) [↗Self-help].

Finally, drug use in Tunisia is already on a dangerous rise due to the increase in drug smuggling across porous borders. In September, the magazine *Leaders al-ʿarabiyya* publishes an explosive dossier on this issue entitled “This is how the drug cartels will fall.” The dossier reveals that Tunisia is a transit ground for drug traffickers, particularly of hashish destined to Europe. The cannabis resin is typically produced in Morocco and brought in through the long and porous border with Algeria. Some of it is also smuggled through Libya from sub-Saharan Africa. We learn that the volume of the drug market in Tunisia amounts to tens of millions of dinars and that in the first half of the year, already 1,850 kilograms of hashish were confiscated by the police. The dossier also reveals that the number of people who engage in the hashish trade continues to increase and that jihadists collude with drug smugglers to finance their terrorist activities (*Leaders al-ʿarabiyya*) [↗Security vs. Fear]. In Egypt, there is also regular media coverage of the issue of border security, smuggling activities of criminal networks and the influx of drugs in the country. In September, during an interview on *Nazra*, a show airing on the TV channel *Ṣadā al-balad*, Ahmed Omar (Aḥmad ʿUmar), head of the Anti-Narcotics General Administration, reveals that drugs cost the Egyptian national economy “billions” of pounds specifying that since the beginning of the year a total of 12 tons of hashish have been found in Egypt (YT “Mudīr al-idāra...”).

In light of the high demand for the drug, hashish dealing as a way to make fast cash can be a tempting business for young Tunisians and Egyptians who are stuck in years of unemployment and aspire for a more affluent lifestyle [↗Young vs. Settled, ↗Affluence vs. Destitution]. For many poor young people especially in the border regions, hashish smuggling even offers a means of livelihood [↗Center vs. Periphery].

As for those countless ordinary – regular or occasional – hashish consumers who do not engage in any trafficking activities, their hashish use serves more purpose than mere relief from boredom and distress. Smoking hashish also means protesting, not only directly against the harsh drug laws, but also indirectly against patronizing and oppressive political and social structures. In fact, praising hashish in songs and other artistic mediums like graffiti or fashion wear has become a popular symbolic means for young people to criticize state and patriarchal authority and claim more self-determination. For instance, in the fragile ballad “I will smoke hashish” (*hashrab hashīsh*) that has gathered millions of listeners this year, the young Egyptian singer Lūkā sums up the restrictions of growing up as a girl in society, and as a remedy to these she suggests to “smoke hashish”:

My grandma told me girls should wear dresses / my mom told me girls shouldn't play
in the mud / and my aunt who wears a veil told me 'sing as you wish but you will go
to hell' / as for my dad, he said nothing / so I'll do what's right and smoke hashish
(LŪKĀ). [↗Young vs. Settled, ↗Male vs. Female]

In Tunisia, also, songs praising hashish/*zaṭla* are a popular outlet for young people who wish to challenge authoritarian structures and claim more autonomy. In one of the (post-) revolutionary Tunisian cult songs entitled “Living as a Poor” (*zawwelī ʿayyesh*) which *zaṭla* lovers listen and sing along to throughout the year, we hear music stars Bendirman, Hamzaoui Med Amine and Klay BBJ chant together [↗Pop Music, ↗Celebrities]:

Marijuana please, dear bro' / serve, pass along, puff / do not get stuck in boredom / hey government, stop the control, turn away your stare / a year and a vespa [a metaphor for 1000 Tunisian dinars] are for me just a short film / change the law, old man [president Bājī Qā'id as-Sabsī] / roll, roll, be quick / the love of my heart *zākātākā* / those who are afraid of her are cowards / in our heads, we are always high / hey Mama, stop it / the curtains are too withdrawn / guards know about us, many have pointed to us / informants are watching us / shall we have another one [joint] or is it enough / this product is hot, this product is delicious / not mixed with medicaments like others / the police will rush on us / chains will be put on our hands / we did nothing nor took anything / we only smoked because we are fed up / we are suffocated, I swear / Leave us alone, please (BENDIRMAN, MED AMINE, and KLAY BBJ).

Related Entries

ARRAYS – ‘*Ashwā'iyyāt*’ ♦ Celebrities ♦ Court Trials ♦ Crowdfunding ♦ Disappearances ♦ Dollar Crisis ♦ Downtown/Centre-ville ♦ Football ♦ Garbage ♦ The Honourable Citizen ♦ The Policeman Criminal ♦ Pop Music ♦ Prison ♦ Self-help ♦ Suicide ♦ The Suspect Foreigner ♦ Tourist Resorts

CODES – Affluence vs. Destitution ♦ Center vs. Periphery ♦ Freedom vs. Constraint ♦ Hope vs. Hell ♦ Male vs. Female ♦ Past vs. Present ♦ Security vs. Fear ♦ “The System” vs. “The People” ♦ Young vs. Settled

CODES COLLAPSED – Hope = Hell (Dystopia) ♦ Inferiority = Superiority (Satire)

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