Plain and Plateau Country

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Some observers of the current Libyan scene wonder why the course of the country’s ongoing revolution differed so markedly, in both duration and style, from what happened in neighboring Tunisia and Egypt. The answer may lie in our understanding of Libya’s geography, equally different from its two neighbors.

No doubt, Libya’s unique geography contributed to setting the various scenarios of the Arab Spring. The sheer size of the country, the location of its salient physical units, and the low population density, not to speak of the utterly immature and weird political system that prevailed in the country for over four decades, could provide some answers to the presumed stalemate in the progress of the revolution.

In the first place, the country as a whole is a huge desert landmass stretching across northeastern Africa. More than one and a half times larger than Tunisia and Egypt combined, Libya is (now that Sudan has been divided into two countries) the third largest country in Africa. It has the longest Mediterranean coastline in North Africa. And it houses half the population of Tunisia, and about one-fifteenth of Egypt’s.

Libya is dotted with numerous, widely dispersed human settlements whose locations were dictated by country’s scarce water resources, which are limited to coastal areas and some habitable desert depressions. It is an extensive territory comprising coastal plains and plateaus, inland plains and intermittent Wadi systems, and the northern and southern desert depressions. In the east the Jabal al-Akhdar, which I designate as the Cyrenaican bulge because of its promontory-like shape, adequately shelters the Benghazi Plain in the east, while in the west Jabal Nafusa mountains shelter the Jefara Plain. Both plains and plateaus accommodate about four-fifths of Libya’s population. All the settlements of the two plateaus and one plain (i.e., Benghazi’s), plus the third largest city of Misrata, are now free and completely out of Gaddafi’s control.

Excluding the northwestern tip of the Gulf of Sirt and its extension westwards until it merges with the Jefara Plain, the rest of the country belongs to the Sahara desert with occasional depressions sustaining few scattered oases settlements. In this sense, Libya is similar to Egypt whose population is concentrated along the narrow stretch of the Valley of the Nile and in its eternal gift, the Delta. However, unlike the continuous elongated Valley of the Nile and the rather compact shape of the Egyptian Delta, Libya’s two plateaus and two semi-triangular plains are located distances apart.

The two mountainous landscapes jutting in northern Libya that flank its two most populous coastal plains are roughly the same in extent and average elevation. Both ranges held great strategic values; the highlands of Jabal al-Akhdar proved to be decisive during the two decades (1911-1931) of Libya’s struggle against Italian colonial rule. Likewise, the Allies benefited greatly from the rugged nature of Cyrainca’s al-Jabal al-Akhdar, and its extension into al-Butnan Plateau, in defeating of the Axis powers in North Africa during World War II. The rugged terrain of Jabal Nafusa played a similar and no less heroic role in the present fight for Libya’s ‘second independence’ from Gaddafi’s ruthless regime. The now completely liberated
Jabal Nafusa provides access to and control of supply routes in the south, particularly the border junction of Ghadamis with Algeria and Tunisia on the one hand, and Fezzan and Ghat, another border crossing with Algeria, on the other.

The hilly limestone massif of Jabal Nafusa extends from a point near al-Khums on the Mediterranean coast some one hundred kilometres east of Tripoli, and continues in a southwesterly direction until it ends in the Tunisian lands. Settlements in Jabal Nafusa include several towns, whose names have become familiar since the revolution such as the important towns of Gharyan (نقارن), Yifrin (يفرين), Nalut (نالوت), and Tarhuna (ثرونة), in addition to other smaller towns such as Jadi (يادو), al-Rigban (الرجبان), Kabao (كاباو), al-Qawalish (الفواليش), Kakkala (قكلة), al-Qala’a (قلعة), al-Reheibat (الرحبات), al-Asabia (الأصبياء), al-Qawalish (الفواليش), and the border crossing town of Wazin (وازن). Some of these towns and hamlets, sheltered by their mountainous locations were among the first to join the revolution.

Though almost 1500 kilometers separate the two plateaus and the two plains at their midpoints, they were never as politically and militarily connected as they have been during the ongoing revolution. Social and political interaction, as well as military supplies and frontline operations, have run smoothly between the two sides of the country despite the presence of Gaddafi’s force between them.

At any rate, if there was ever a stalemate in the territorial progress of the revolution it ended in recent days, when freedom fighters from Jabal Nafusa started their offensive operations, advancing into the Jefara plain, capturing along the way important strategic locations and already had pushed to a distance of less than 100 kilometers south of Tripoli.

At the same time, their eastern brethren are preparing their own offensive westwards with the intent of recapturing the towns of the oil region and, hopefully, liberating Sirt, and beyond, to join their comrades in Misrata. Misrata fighters, on their part, are making equally important gains as they march westwards closer to Zliten, one of two remaining crucial cities before entering Tripoli from the east. Liberating the towns located along the shores of the Gulf of Sirt (i.e, the oil terminals of Brega, Ras Lanuf, Sidra and the town of Sirt) will ensure the coalescence of the two strategic plateaus and the two populous plains.

Setting aside the debate over whether a stalemate is present or not, one thing for sure: change in Libya is irrevocable. Gaddafi still has the money and guns to sustain him, but he is losing strategic territory on a rapid scale, rendering him in tight, defenseless positions as revolutionary forces close in on him from their relatively sheltered regions.

Free Libyans have pride and faith in their nation and have successfully reinstated their sense of unity and destiny. What they achieved militarily reflects an awareness of the country’s landscape and excellent utilization of it. But what they have gained as people trying to reclaim their country far exceeds all their territorial gains.

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