How geography and history enhanced unity in Libya

Mansour M Elbabour
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Gross misconceptions and stereotypes abound in the literature about alleged threats to Libyan national unity due to its geography, tribal background, regional disparity and the uneven distribution of population. One recent publication even associated what it described as Libya’s ‘bi-polar demography’ pattern with some aspects of the physical environment. Unfortunately, those who tend to adopt and repeat such conventional vocabulary for describing Libya are negating its long political, social, and urban history, as well as its historical geography and geopolitics.

In order not to be distracted by some outdated notions of environmental determinism, it is important to note that geographical factors are not only physical; they are also economic, social, cultural, and humanistic. Also, it should be added that absolute geographic distance alone cannot help much in explaining the actual linkages that bound parts of an area together; rather, functional distance is sought instead for this purpose.

My argument is that the unity of the country is really found in both its geography and history. Over millennia, the territory that came to be known as Libya in modern times has been the homeland of great interacting civilizations and indigenous communities who have contributed to the diversity if its cultural heritage, a rich heritage most evident in the territory’s urban settlements. These settlements formed spatial nodes in a geographically-based network established since Roman times when the territory began to be recognized as a distinct geographical unit. It is contended, therefore, that the roots of the present spatial pattern of Libya must be sought in its early history of settlement, rather than in some preconceived viewpoints and speculative reasoning.

Without going into detail of the historical development of the early cities, it is suffice to say that, with very few exceptions, antecedents of present day urban framework were deeply rooted in the territory’s history. Examples of urban foundations built on, or adjacent to, sites of ancient and medieval urban centers include Tripoli, Benghazi, Shahat, Sabrata, Zwarat, Misrata, Zliten, al-Khums, Derna, Tobruk, al-Marj, Susa, Tolmeta, Tokera, Deriana, and many more located in Jabal Nafusa and in the inhabited southern desert depressions such as Zwela, Germa, Ghadames, and Ghat.

Others, such as Sebha, al-Zawiya and al-Beida, grew as important regional administrative centers in modern times (al-Beida even became a national capital at one time); still others emerged as by-products of the exploitation activities of oil resources, i.e., the oil exporting ports of Marsa al-Brega, Ras Lanuf, and Sidra.

The reader, with even a scant knowledge of the geography of Libya, will notice that the widely distributed locations I have listed above refer to almost all the important cities and towns, large and small, of present day Libya. An impressive continuity exists between members of the ancient urban systems of the `Pentapolis` in the east and the `Tripolis` in the west and their modern successors in the same locations. Naturally, the ancient urban centers struggled under a multitude of adverse conditions of stagnation and decline; however, the overall framework of the urban
scene Libya inherited from its past history remained essentially unchanged and retained its original spatial order. Viewed as a spatial system, these centers and their hinterlands form the constituents of a functionally interconnected urban hierarchy today, as perhaps, they had formed a similar one in antiquity.

The remarkable hierarchical distribution of the components of the urban framework all over the inhabited regions is also a product of geography as much as it is a product of history. The physical nature of the land is generally characterized by the absence of rugged territory, albeit in the eastern and western coastal strips where highlands of moderate elevations -less than 900 meters above sea level- run parallel to the coastline, favor rather than hinder linkages among components of the urban system. Furthermore, absence of enclaves, not to mention exclaves, and the fact that city and countryside were far from being mutually exclusive, support the contention that cities and towns, each with its own sphere of influence, were always functionally and socially linked and supportive of each other.

I have relied on the concept of an urban system and used it as a surrogate for demonstrating the spatial unity of the territory, an underlying unity created in ancient times and survived, implicitly and explicitly, until modern times. Thus, the supposed disparity between east and west which existed during Greek/Phoenician times was actually eliminated by the Romans who ruled one territory and ventured deeper into the interior of the land. Beginning in the middle of the 7th-century, the ‘Islamic city’ model of settlement spread all over the territory, superimposing on the old urban sites or built adjacent to them. Nearly a millennium later, the Ottomans (1551-1911) ruled one consolidated territory. When the Italians, on their part, occupied Libya in 1911 they colonized one territory and formalized its geopolitical name. No doubt, Libya has the required unifying parameters that keep it bound together.

Needless to say, this brief hint about the spatial organization of Libya was not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to inspire further discussion and contemplation of the inherent geographic order that directs human interaction in space everywhere and at all times. In the case of Libya, to fully comprehend its present urban framework, and, hence, its spatial unity, the ancient urban experience must be thoroughly investigated and regarded as providing the foundation for later spatial developments.

Mansour Elbabour
Chair, Urban Planning Society of Libya
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