CHAPTER TEN

THE NAFUSA MOUNTAINS

1. INTRODUCTION

The Nafusa Mountains lie to the southwest of Tripoli, extending parallel to the Mediterranean Sea from Libya's capital to the Tunisian border.1 The Nafusa Mountains, also referred to as the Nafusa Highlands, mark the end of the Coastal Plain and beginning of the Tripolitania Plateau, which extends south into the Libyan interior and serves as a natural divider between the north and the south of the country.2 The mountains rise to heights nearing 1,000 meters before plateauing and ending abruptly with 350-meter high bluffs on the north side facing the Mediterranean Sea.3 The plateau and the mountains can be accessed from the north by a number of valleys that extend from the coastal plain. The region stretches from the city of Al-Gharyan4 on the eastern edge of the mountains to the town of Wazin on the Tunisian border, with a road connecting the two cities.5

The Nafusa Mountains includes cities such as Al-Gharyan, Zintan, Yafran, Nalut and Jadu as well as dozens of villages. Most of the populated cities and towns are located on the ridgeline, providing a natural security barrier that historically functioned to ward off attackers. There are two main roads that run east to west through the Nafusa Mountains, the low

---

4 Not to be confused with Ghayran in the outskirts of Misrata.
5 Asketell & Ghellali, A palaeogeologic map, supra note 3. See also Megerisi & Mamgain, The Upper Cretaceous-Tertiary formations of northern Libya, supra note 3.
road and high road. The low road runs across the ridgeline linking the small settlements at the foot of the mountains, while the high road runs on the plateau connecting the southern mountain towns.\(^6\)

The Nafusa Mountains are densely populated relative to the rest of Libya.\(^7\) The mountain area is home to the indigenous Berber population (also called the Amazigh), with Arabs making up a minority of the area’s residents.\(^8\) While much of the Libyan Berber population are mixed with the Arab Bani Hilal and Bani Sulaym, the Berber language and practices remained strongest in the Nafusa Mountains region. The Berber communities of the region live primarily in the cities of Yafran, Kabaw, Jadu and Nalut as well as smaller mountain villages and communities. The main Arab tribes of the Nafusa Mountains are the Mashashiyya, Awlad Busayf, Nawayl, Rayaniyya, Al-Rujban, and the Zintan (one of the most prominent, and composed of both Arab and Berber sub-tribes). During the Qadhafi era, the Arab tribes generally enjoyed privilege relative to their Berber neighbors.\(^9\)

The Berber communities’ political relationship with the rest of the region is a long and complicated one, dating back to the Italian occupation when they chose not to side with the local Tripolitanian leadership. The Berbers of the Nafusa Mountains region generally supported King Idris and his strongly federalist policy, and opposed the Qadhafi regime. After 1969, Berbers were subjected to Arabization policies, including a prohibition on speaking their languages or giving children Berber names.\(^10\) The relationship between the Nafusa Mountains Berbers and the Libyan state is therefore fused with a history of resistance and struggle for cultural survival.\(^11\) At the start of the protest movement in February 2011, many Berber tribes – including the Yafran, Jadu, Fassatu, Kabaw and Haraba – joined the thuwar.\(^12\)

The resentment accrued from historical marginalization of the Berber under the Qadhafi regime ended up contributing to the success of the

---

\(^6\) Bell et al., The Tide Turns, supra note 1 at 13.

\(^7\) Id.

\(^8\) Id. at 14.

\(^9\) Id. at 11. For more background on tribes in Libya, see the Basic Facts about Libya.


\(^12\) Bell et al., The Tide Turns, supra note 1 at 11.