

03-02-2020

Ariha: An ancient Syrian town emptied and destroyed

Ariha: An ancient Syrian town emptied and destroyed

Fatima Hajj Musa
ترجمة: أليكس راول



A newly-displaced resident of north Syria's Ariha writes of her historic hometown, renowned since antiquity for its greenery, now reduced to empty piles of bloodstained rubble.

[Editor's note: This article was originally published in [Arabic](#) on 3 February, 2020. Since that date, the city of Saraqeb

and its surroundings have fallen under the control of the Bashar al-Assad regime, though Ariha itself remains in opposition hands.]

On both sides of Ariha's Market Street stand dozens of shops selling sweets. Their windows display the full range for which the city is famous: mushabbak; awwama; halawat al-jibn. Most important of all is shuaybiyyat, the town's great pride and trademark, with which it's practically synonymous, such that the name Ariha can hardly be mentioned without adding shuaybiyyat. The sweet traveled with the city's people throughout their displacement and exile—it's enough for a shop anywhere in the world to write "Ariha shuaybiyyat" on its façade to draw the attention of Syrians.

The town's cardamom market, meanwhile, is the last of its kind in the surrounding region, popular especially with people from the nearby towns and villages of Jabal al-Zawiya, for whom Ariha is a marketplace in which to sell their produce, and a center for shopping, studying, healthcare, and work.



Like a beehive, the town buzzes each day till the late hours of the night. Or rather, it did, until 2020 brought abrupt changes to the town, in the form of an intense military campaign by the Assad regime and its allies, which grew more intense still after the latter took over the city of Ma'arrat al-Nu'man along with other towns and villages in the environs.

Emptied and destroyed

The images and [videos](#) now coming out of Ariha depict widespread destruction across the city. Local activists estimate around 30% of Ariha has been totally leveled, and a further 20% partially damaged. They also believe some 90% of Ariha's residents have fled in recent weeks to seek refuge in safer areas, as the air and artillery bombardment intensify, and residents fear a ground advance by the regime towards the city.

During the month of January alone, local civil defense crews documented four direct airstrikes on Ariha's main market, as well as another market, a hospital, a bakery, and the civil defense staff themselves. A mosque, a kindergarten, a school, and numerous civilian houses were also hit. At least 25 civilians were killed, including seven children and numerous medical staff, most recently Zakwan Tammaa, the administrative director of al-Shami Hospital, who died of wounds sustained in the strikes. Dozens more have been injured.

The bombardment has rendered most medical services inoperative in the town, according to an announcement by the Idlib health directorate, which said the attack on al-Shami Hospital left no more health centers operational across the entirety of southern Idlib province. In recent months, Ariha had taken in large numbers of people displaced from elsewhere in the province, who were forced to live in harsh conditions due to the suspension of aid from humanitarian organizations, according to Muhammad Khalid al-Attar, an engineer and member of the "Youths for Syria" organization, which was active in and around Ariha before suspending its work recently. "Today, the town is practically

empty,” he tells Al-Jumhuriya. “Most Internet towers have been dismantled and transported. The same goes for bakeries, most of which have been taken apart and moved, while others were destroyed by bombardment.” Al-Attar describes one recent night in Ariha as having been “pitch-black,” with residents too afraid of being targeted to light up so much as a lamp.

“Only a small minority remained in the city. Electricity generators and water containers have stopped, as have all Internet networks, except one working at a specific location,” media activist Sulayman Abd al-Qadir told Al-Jumhuriya. A local woman who requested anonymity said the city was “completely shut down, with no activity except the work of the civil defense teams.”

“Death is everywhere”

It was a “miracle,” says Layla Saeed, a humanitarian activist from Ariha, that she and her children survived the strike on al-Shami Hospital, which happened to be located near her home. They woke to the sound of a blast that smashed the windows and doors of the house.

“There was thick dust, and dirt and shrapnel everywhere. We took cover in a side room away from the main street, only for another rocket to land, punching a hole in the wall of the room. I ran with my children toward the bomb shelter underneath the building. The sound of crying and screaming filled the air, until it was overpowered by a third blast, and then the sirens of the ambulances and civil defense crews looking for survivors under the rubble. When I came out, I was carrying a bag containing my ID papers. I took one last look at the wreckage of my house, and left.”



The days and sleepless nights leading up to this attack, on the night of 29 January, had already seen numerous families depart the town. When the attack came, almost everyone remaining decided to leave. “The streets filled with buses waiting to take them away,” says Layla. “This time there was no Ariha to greet them. Most headed for the camps in the north, while others wandered aimlessly, not knowing where their feet were taking them.”

“Will the city fall?” This, says Layla, is the question that has haunted her ever since, and was etched on the frightened faces of all the residents that joined her on the journey of mass displacement.

Abu Ahmad, another Ariha resident, describes the events of that day as “apocalyptic:” people shouting through walkie-talkies at the civil defense and ambulances to arrive; others searching for survivors after the first raid, soon followed by the others on the same target to kill the greatest number possible of civilians and rescue workers; collapsed buildings with women and children fumbling for exits in the darkness. Most of those killed were displaced people from elsewhere, who had fled to Ariha from battles in their own towns and villages, only to find death waiting for them once again. “Nowhere is safe anymore,” Abu Ahmad tells Al-Jumhuriya. “Death is everywhere.”

Strategic significance

Ariha is located to the south of Idlib City. In official administrative terms, the greater Ariha area comprises 55 smaller towns and villages, as well as 44 farms. The town of

Ariha itself has great geographic significance within Idlib Governorate, in that it sits in the middle of four major cities: Jisr al-Shughur to the west; Ma'arrat al-Nu'man to the south; Saraqeb to the east; and Idlib to the north.

The Ariha area also contains the Arba'een mountain, part of the Jabal al-Zawiya series of mountains, reaching a height of around 1,000 meters above sea level. This strategic highland overlooks the national M4 highway connecting Saraqeb to Latakia on the Mediterranean coast, as well as the road from Ariha to Idlib, and a number of towns and villages in Jabal al-Zawiya and even southern Aleppo Province. Whoever controls Mount Arba'een, therefore, enjoys the ability to cut their opponents' supply routes and monitor their movements or incoming assaults.

For this reason, the Assad regime had fought hard to keep hold of Ariha in the early years of the revolution, which had seen three attempts by opposition factions to liberate the town by the end of 2014. Local residents paid dearly for their eventual release from the regime's rule, with around 1,300 [killed](#) as of the start of 2015. On 28 May, 2015, the jihadist-led "Army of Conquest" coalition succeeded in taking control of the town after driving out the regime.

Ariha represents a mid-point between Aleppo and the Mediterranean, on the one hand, and between Idlib and Ma'arrat al-Nu'man, on the other. In addition, the road leading to it from Jisr al-Shughur hems in all the towns and villages of Jabal al-Zawiya, which is one reason so many of their residents fled, fearing besiegement.

The military situation today

Ariha today contains local fighters from the town itself as

well as the surrounding villages. Those with whom Al-Jumhuriya spoke said they first moved their families to safe locations and then returned to defend the area. They were reluctant to divulge details about their preparations, saying only that they would do what they could to keep the town out of the regime's hands.

Al-Attar, the engineer and activist, does not downplay the significance of the local resistance, though he recognizes the disparity between the scale of the air and ground bombardment pounding the town and the ability of the lightly-armed locals to combat them. For their part, fighters encountered by Al-Jumhuriya said the regime's forces were heading for the city of Saraqeb, east of Ariha, and would be concentrating the bulk of their firepower there. The fighters asserted the military map would change in the coming days, since the regime had been sustaining large losses in men and materiel, while new fronts had been opened in the Aleppo countryside as opposition factions mounted counter-attacks.



Subhi al-Khalid, a local activist from Jabal al-Zawiya, tells Al-Jumhuriya that regional and international factors may prevent the regime from succeeding in its ambition to control all of the M4 and M5 highways in their entirety; an aim that, if accomplished, would inevitably mean the capture of Ariha. By way of evidence, al-Khalid points to an intensifying dispute between Russia and Turkey, made manifest in Turkey's deployment of five [observation posts](#) around Saraqeb. One such post has faced direct fire from Assad regime forces, killing Turkish troops in the process, and prompting a wide-ranging response from the Turkish

army against regime positions. These developments, al-Khalid argues, indicate Turkey aims to prevent the regime from taking the highways in full.

The Ariha of memory



Since antiquity, Ariha has been bound to the city of Aleppo. In his 13th-century Encyclopedia of Countries, the geographer Yaqut al-Hamawi described it as “a small town on the outskirts of Aleppo; the most verdant and luscious on God’s earth; endowed with green fields, trees, and rivers.” Indeed, as well its famous sweets, Ariha is also renowned for cherry trees. It was a breathing space for the surrounding region’s residents, especially Aleppans, with its touristic sites and ancient archaeological monuments. As for its name itself—which it shares with the biblical Jericho—it is thought to hail from Aramaic roots, meaning “the sweet fragrance of flowers.”

