

Homs: Inside the obliterated town Syria once called the 'capital of the revolution'

Four years after rebels withdrew from last strongholds in ancient city, few people have returned

By Bassem Mroue. *Independent*. Published: January 17, 2018.

Sumaya Bairuty walked through abandoned streets pocked with shell craters amid rows of destroyed buildings, at times climbing over giant sand barriers before reaching her parent's apartment in the once rebel-held district of Bab Dreib in this central Syrian city.

The 38-year-old English-language teacher who works in the capital Damascus comes to Homs by bus once a week to spend two days with her parents, who live alone in their newly fixed apartment in the heavily destroyed and mostly deserted area.

It has been almost four years since the last rebels and civilians withdrew from the remaining strongholds in the ancient heart of Homs in May 2014, surrendering to President Bashar Assad a bloodstained city once dubbed the "capital of the revolution." Few people have returned, and large parts of the once vibrant old city are still abandoned and destroyed, as if time had stood still since the guns fell silent.

For Sumaya's family, the main sorrow remains the loss of her youngest sibling, Rabih, in 2015. He was killed by insurgents in the rebel-held northwestern province of Idlib.

"This was the biggest loss. Neither the house nor the work or any other thing was as painful as losing Rabih," she said.

The Bairuty family's home in Bab Dreib is in the heart of the former rebel-held districts of Homs. The streets are so shell-pocked and destroyed that cars cannot drive, and the nearest area with shops and vehicles is a 20-minute walk away.

As Sumaya walked into her parent's second-floor, two-bedroom apartment, she found her father sitting on the floor next to a diesel heater eating fried cauliflower and bread for lunch while watching a soccer match on TV as her mother sat nearby.

She explained that the family had to change homes eight times since the Syrian conflict erupted seven years ago, after their main home was destroyed.

In 2012, the Bairuty family fled to Damascus after their neighborhood fell into rebel hands. A year later they returned to Homs, renting several homes before moving into the building of Sumaya's maternal grandparents in October 2016, a bit more than two years after government forces recaptured all of central Homs.

After they moved into their latest apartment, the UN helped the family fix it up by installing new windows and doors and closing the gaping holes in the walls.

Sumaya's younger brother was about to turn 18 in 2015 and wanted to move to Turkey to find a job and escape compulsory military service. The family contacted relatives in the rebel-held village of Saraqeb, Idlib, who promised to help him move to Turkey.

Bairuty and her mother, Tamador Shilar, both said their relatives tipped off the Isis-linked extremist group Jund al-Aqsa about him, telling them that he and his family were strong government supporters.

Within days, the young man was put on so-called trial by the group, which sentenced him to death for being a government supporter and ruled in favour of punishing his elder sister, who teaches at a government-run school.

Weeks later, the family received Rabih's identity cards and belongings through a taxi driver who drives between the rebel-held Idlib province and Homs. A letter said that he was killed because he did not join the "holy war" against the government, Shilar and Beiruti said.

Shilar said she cannot shake off the feeling of grief.

"It's the feeling of any woman who lost her son and he was not guilty," she said, as she wiped tears from her face. "He was unjustly treated by the dogs."

Bairuty's father, Mohammed Riad, said they are lucky to have a home, adding that they now get 12 hours of electricity every day and two hours of drinking water. He walks for about half an hour every day to reach the market to buy groceries.

Amid an ongoing civil war, no western countries have stepped up to help finance Syria's reconstruction. The governorate has repaired the old covered marketplace as well as some of the city's old churches, and the city's famous Khaled bin al-Waleed mosque is undergoing renovation. But most of the neighbourhoods are still sprawling ruins.

The residents who have trickled back are using their own money or UN assistance to fix their homes just enough to be liveable.

Homs Governor Talal Barazi told the Associated Press that 21,000 families, amounting 30 per cent of Homs city's original population of 1.2 million, have returned.

Riad said he hopes that once reconstruction begins, there will be demand for him as the 70-year-old man was a construction worker for most of his life.

"The situation in general is good but our main problem is that there is no transportation here," he said as he watched the soccer match on an Iraqi channel.

Shilar said she is worried about the future and thinks that even if Homs is rebuilt, reconciliation is a long way off. "It is not only the buildings [that were damaged] but also the souls," she said.