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The Syrian Shabiha and Their State

by Yassin al-Haj Salih

Syrian regime thugs, more commonly known as 'shabiha' mirror the structure and goals of the Assad regime which relies on raw force to accumulate personal wealth and ensure its own survival at all costs. In this article, Yassin al-Haj Saleh, dissects the functioning, motivations, funding and ideology of the shabiha, from their appearance in the 1970s until their reemergence during the revolution. Saleh shows their central role in maintaining a regime in power that has long lost touch with people's interests, morality and reality.



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Even as the word *shabiha* emerged from Syria, to take its place in the languages of the world, the phenomenon to which it referred was surfacing in Syria's streets, terrorizing, murdering, and mouthing obscenities.

Thus a term hitherto unknown outside Syria entered the Arabic language. Indeed, it was not widely known within Syria itself, and it soon spawned derivatives: *shab-bah*, *yushabbih*, *tashbih*; i.e. "to act like the *shabiha*/to be thuggish". Used primarily to refer to those loyal to the regime, (the young revolutionaries prefer the term *al-mundasseen* or "collaborators"), it was also used then found itself deployed with admiring overtones: the "*shabiha* of the pen" for Rana Qubani, the "*shabiha* of the opposition", and a Syrian accolade bestowed on French thinker Bernard-Henri Levy as "the *shabih* of the philosophers".

Its origins are obscure. Is it perhaps derived from *ash-baah* ("ghosts"), because the *shabiha* operate outside the law, living in the shadows, both figuratively and literally, materializing and vanishing with bewildering speed? Is it taken from the *shabah*, the once popular Mercedes model, which senior members of the *shabiha* were said to favour for their operations and to set themselves apart?¹ Or perhaps it is related to the idea of extending and widening privileges and powers², as when an individual broadens his *shabh*, or shadow, by standing tall and holding his arms out. In this analogy, the "privileges" or "shadow" would refer to official compensation or reward for undertaking some task or other, while the act of stretching and widening would be the task itself, as performed by the *shabiha*.

1

The term *shabiha* first became current in the late 1970s, after Syria's intervention in Lebanon in 1976 and the corresponding rise in smuggling from an open country like Lebanon to its economically isolated neighbour.

Up until the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011, the term was used in a relatively narrow sense, to refer to bands of young Alawite males from the Syrian coastal regions and their leaders, all of whom came from influential Alawite families: first the al-Assad family itself, and later the Deeb family (related to the al-Assad

clan) and the Makhlouf family (maternal cousins to the children of Hafez al-Assad). They made their living from smuggling (electrical goods, tobacco, drugs, alcohol, antiquities, etc.) and imposing "taxes" (extortion). They were noted for their brutality and cruelty and their blind devotion to their leaders, usually referred to as *mu'allim* ("boss")³ or *khaal* ("uncle")⁴. In this respect they were similar to mafia organizations, which they resembled also by being well known to both the central authorities, who turned a blind eye to their activities, and the local authorities, who collaborated with them and granted their leaders immunity from prosecution. It is worth noting that if there were a conflict of interests between the *shabiha* and these local authorities, the authorities would not dare defend themselves⁵.

By the 1980s the *shabiha* were untouchable and operated with impunity in the coastal city of Latakia. The late respected Syrian intellectual Elias Marcos, once recalled that he had been sitting in a cafe in Latakia when *shabiha* members entered and amused themselves by forcing patrons to lie on the floor beneath their tables. They killed a young man who objected to their insults;⁶ they used threats to obtain property and possessions for reduced prices or for free; their leaders raped attractive young women; and they offered to resolve disputes in exchange for a hefty commission from both sides, ensuring victory for the party that paid the most⁷.

Their victims were from all backgrounds and more than a few were Alawites. Several stories from the early Nineties refer to a young woman by the name of Hala Aqel, who was abducted, raped, murdered and her corpse dumped outside her relatives' house. Around the same time, a university professor by the name of Samir Ghafar was killed for refusing to pass a young female student in his class, who turned out to be under the patronage of a senior *shabih*.

The *shabiha* tended to live in areas that were either predominantly or partially Alawite and the first to suffer at their hands were their neighbours. The *shabih* Abu Rammah would force his neighbours in one quarter of Latakia to work for him, before bricking up the entrance to his alley and erecting swings for his children and a large tent to receive guests⁸.

2

One of the primary features of the Syrian *shabiha* is the fluidity of the boundaries that separate them from the official agencies of state. The origin of this ambiguous status lies in ties of kinship that bind their “bosses” with an autocratic president (also a “boss”) as well as a structural similarity between state and *shabiha*, both of which exercise power through the arbitrary use of violence and what are known as *al-taballi* and *al-salbata*.⁹ *Al-salbata* is a uniquely Syrian term for the way in which state authority is exercised in Assad’s Syria: It is an amalgamation of *salab* (looting or plundering), *labat* (the act of knocking someone down) and *tasallut* (the unfettered exercise of power). *Al-taballi* is roughly equivalent to “informing” and means falsely accusing a person of doing something for which they will pay a heavy price, such as insulting the president or making sectarian statements.¹⁰

Starting in the latter half of the 1970s and for a decade afterwards, the *saraya al-difaa`*, or Defence Brigades, were the closest thing Syria had to a militia; they were above the law and funded by the state. Rifaat al-Assad, brother of former president Hafez al-Assad and the commander of the Brigades until 1985, was a *shabih* in every sense of the word. A coarse, vulgar and violent man, he was known for his cruelty and corruption, and enjoyed an almost complete monopoly over the illegal trade in Syrian antiquities. While his brother Hafez was calculating and deliberate, Rifaat was a creature of instinct and sudden urges. It is common knowledge that Rifaat was directly responsible for the massacre of Hama in 1982, and before that, the massacre in Tadmor (Palmyra) Prison in 1980. Hafez, however, was responsible for everything. The daily, arbitrary torture carried out for twenty years against Islamist prisoners in Tadmor tells you all you need to know about Hafez’s style.

In any case, the regime placed its own survival before all other considerations, which guaranteed that it would regard the people it ruled with suspicion, as though they were a source of danger that must be watched at all times. This attitude is a cornerstone of the credo espoused by the *mukhabbarat* (Syrian security apparatus) throughout the Assad era. It intersects with the historical narrative

of victimhood that prevails in the Alawite community, which has supplied the overwhelming majority of security officials in Assad’s Syria, leaders and rank-and-file alike, and it should come as no surprise that non-state actors from this same background should evince the same attitudes as their official counterparts. Such attitudes are evident in their hostile and vengeful treatment of the demonstrators today, Alawites and non-Alawites alike, and of society as a whole. Moreover, in times of crisis and turmoil, it is only to be expected that state officials will start to act like the *shabiha*. Syrians and those following events in Syria have seen video clips showing groups of *mukhabbarat* carrying out punitive operations as if straight from Syria’s colonial past, using tactics that characterized sectarian militias from Lebanon and Iraq. A film from al-Baida (a village near Banias in the Tartous Governate) is the most famous of these clips¹¹, but it is not the only one.

In their most basic form, the *shabiha* are defined by four essential characteristics. The first is the bonds of blood and sect that link them to the family of the ruler. The second is a predisposition to be hostile towards society, which makes them a perfect means to practice violence, both organized and arbitrary, against the civilian population. This anti-social tendency may be a distorted version of the anti-authoritarian, subversive attitudes that prevail in all marginalized and minority social groups. Such attitudes contain a kind of primitive democratic thought, but in the Assad era they have been inverted and transformed into a hostile, conservative worldview placed in the service of dictatorship and social fragmentation. The third characteristic is their obedience to their leaders, a form of fetishism facilitated by ties of kinship and obligation. Finally, there is also powerful economic motive. Many of the *shabiha* work as smugglers.¹² Some sources claim that they prefer the Mercedes *shabah* model for this work, because its large trunk is big enough to hold expensive electronic goods. It was rumoured that these cars were themselves smuggled from Lebanon and that their most distinctive feature was a battered appearance that contrasted their relative newness, because the *shabiha* would treat them carelessly, taking a positive pleasure in knocking them around, perhaps because they symbolized a luxury that had been stolen and not earned by work.

The *shabiha* use force to obtain material goods or control over valuable income sources, such as ports. Rifaat al-Assad owned a private port in Latakia, which was only shut down following his power struggle with his brother Hafez in 1984. But while the leaders accumulate staggering personal fortunes, the majority of the *shabiha* are not well off and have no other means of earning a living. Many people suspect that the coastal region as a whole, its Alawite inhabitants in particular, is kept purposely impoverished and underdeveloped to ensure a constant supply of undereducated and unqualified muscle to defend the regime: a cut-price, violent workforce.

The stereotypical *shabih* is uneducated, from an impoverished and marginalized social background. Alawites “He is stocky, heavily muscled, with a shaved head and long beard and usually wears black. But as the *shabiha* have spread, or rather, as the term has come to be more generally used, there is no longer such a thing as the *shabih* “look”. These days, the *shabih* is just spare muscle clutching a gun or taser.

Sectarianism is a useful political device for the authorities because it enables them to mobilize these individuals and get them to defend the regime, even though it is not really in their interests to do so. This is precisely why sectarianism is such a dangerous and fundamentally irrational phenomenon: the poor and disadvantaged can be turned into fanatic defenders of a wealthy political elite, who care nothing for them or their wellbeing, merely by appealing to ties of religion and sect.

However sectarianism is merely a facilitator to the fundamental goal of loyalty to the person of the leader. Indeed, the *shabiha* have spread outside their original home and entered circles that are notable for the strength of their ties of personal loyalty, patronage and duty to the president.

3

The *shabiha*'s loyalty to the president and the regime is not in doubt. The regime only enters into confrontations with the *shabiha* in very specific circumstances. Basil al-Assad, the current president's brother who died in a car accident, led a campaign against them in the early

1990s as he prepared himself to succeed his father. Some were arrested and their leaders, cousins of the ruling family, were obliged to exercise more restraint in public.

The regime has never been able to finish them off for good. Indeed, it has never shown any great desire to do so. Whenever the two have clashed, usually because the regime is guarding its interests at the expense of various *shabiha* groups. There were no clashes between the regime and the *Shabiha* groups unless there is a conflict of interests and that not to slap the *shabiha*'s hands would harm the interests of the regime.. But even in these instances, the *shabiha* are not rooted out altogether; rather, they back off and stand aside. In 2006, Numir al-Assad (Bashar Assad's cousin) and his followers were moved back and forth between the Adra and Saidaniya prisons, but were still able to intimidate the rest of the prison population and the warders without anyone able to control them¹³.

It is not a matter of the state being impotent, but rather of the two sides sharing similar structures and goals. The *shabiha* phenomenon is the dark face of the regime, a mirror of its fundamental political vacuity. It is the regime naked: the rule of privileged violence, untrammled and arbitrary; a blend of violence, kinship and capricious despotism. This political vacuity was powerfully evident in the first months of the uprising, as the regime's avowed ideology—nationalist socialism—gradually fell into abeyance and its true instincts rose to the surface. The *shabiha* emerged as a reserve army, enthusiastically volunteering to shield the regime from the threat of revolution in exchange for small pay.

The state had absorbed the *shabiha* into its structures, then vomited them out in the form of generalized, organized and “legitimized” violence against society. Yet however accommodating one tries to be, it is difficult to honestly describe the violence perpetrated by the Syrian security agencies as “state” violence or indeed as genuinely organized, in the same way that one cannot regard the notorious Tadmor Prison as a state facility. This is because the security agencies are more like an occupying army, one that has penetrated society with its violence, hostility and an almost racist sense

of superiority. It paralyzes society, making resistance impossible outside the context of a full-blown revolution of the sort we see today. Throughout two decades of brutal violence and secrecy, Tadmor was in actuality a factory of terror.

The organic relationship between the *shabiha* and the regime intensifies in the following tragic account, by the late Mamdouh Adwan in his book, *Hayawanat al-Insan (The Bestiality of Man)*:

“[The man] was stopped in his red car at a set of traffic lights. When the lights turned green he engaged the clutch and moved forward. A motorcycle suddenly appeared from the side road, the shabih who was riding it passing straight through the red light. A collision almost occurred but was avoided. Despite the fact it was the shabih who had broken the traffic laws, he still got off his bike and started abusing the driver of the car for not seeing him.

‘Brother,’ the driver said: ‘The lights were green; the road was mine.’

As he kicked him in the face the shabih answered,

‘The road is yours? Don’t you know that this whole country is ours?’”

The *shabih’s* response was a perfect blend of power and sectarian contempt, a mirror of the humiliating *taballi* so widely practiced in the 1980s. During this period the Alawite accent itself became a means to inspire terror and non-Alawites would often use it to benefit from the psychological and material profits it reaped.

4

During the Syrian revolution the meaning of *shabiha* expanded. It has come to refer to the irregular militias which the regime sets on protestors in all regions of the country and as the term has become generalized it has become detached from its original, specific meaning.

In Aleppo, the *shabiha* is composed of powerful local families, the most famous of which is the Berri clan, known for its involvement in drugs and arms smuggling,

its close ties to the regime and its occasional clashes with state institutions, such as courts, the police and the local administration. The resolution of such fall-outs has resulted in a more or less stable form of coexistence. These families and their foot soldiers enjoy almost total control over their neighbourhoods. They answer only to the regime and divide their profits with the regime’s local representatives.

The groups referred to as *shabiha* by the Arab satellite news channels are a different breed altogether: violent ex-offenders and outlaws who enjoy a complex relationship with the *mukhabbarat* and police officers, who run them and share in the profits of their criminal enterprises. The officers protect those who own smuggling and prostitution rings, but this does not prevent them from beating or detaining *shabiha* from time to time. Those in the lowest ranks receive the worst treatment; while their leaders enjoy a greater degree of immunity, at least until disputes over the division of profits require some of the leaders them to be sacrificed.

What the original *shabiha* and these more recent formations have in common is powerful ties of personal loyalty and large, tribally connected families. These characteristics are also shared by the organized criminal networks, which smuggle and sell drugs. In Aleppo these networks have their origins in large families which live in suburbs almost totally outside state control. Until the situation changes, these networks continue to give their allegiance to the “boss”, much like Italian mafia organizations. They also resemble the Syrian security services themselves, whose commanders demand great personal loyalty from their officers, not to mention the sectarian bonds of loyalty that are the glue of many internal networks of patronage¹⁴, and are based on ties of kinship, whether real or imagined. This is what links these groups to the regime, which is structured in turn around allegiance and loyalty to the person of the president. As of the latter half of the 1980s, the president was referred to as “the father leader” and everybody was expected—indeed, compelled—to treat the president as a child treats his parent. The structural similarities between these phenomena are what binds them together, or rather, are what situates them on the same political and social plane.

Just as the essence of the regime is its security policy, the essence of the *shabiha* is its unique blend of sectarianism and violence. These two are more closely related than either the regime and the state on the one hand, or the original *shabiha* with the more recent, post-revolutionary *shabiha* phenomenon, on the other. Indeed, were the regime to fall, it is extremely probable that the regime's security elements will become a *shabiha*: in other words, the essence of the regime will be stripped of its fragile official mask and stand revealed as unrestrained violence, both random and privileged. This process will be facilitated by the eradication of the boundaries that exist between the various security agencies, a process that is already taking place: the *shabiha* enforcing security with the approval of the official security agencies.

5

But are the majority of Alawite *shabiha* prepared to defend the regime to the last bullet? Sectarian affiliations ensure that the threshold for attaining their undying loyalty is lower than average. Yet even the loyalty of these "authentic" *shabiha* cannot be taken for granted.

There is also a "rational" economic motive that must be taken into account. There are plenty who fight bravely for the regime, not just because they have a predisposition to support it, but because doing so costs them little and earns them much. It is said that members of the *shabiha* earn between 7,000 lira (about \$100) and 10,000 (about \$140) *lira* for working on Fridays and at least 2,000 lira (about \$35) for the others days of the week.¹⁵ Given the generally peaceful nature of the uprising the risks involved are also very low¹⁶. But if the *shabiha*'s wages fall and the risks increase, it is very likely that some will "retire"¹⁷. Indeed, it has been claimed that in July 2011 the *shabiha* went on strike because their wages fell, with some returning to their villages and districts in the coastal region¹⁸. This allows us to picture the *shabiha* as a proletariat of repression, selling their "force" to the "capitalist" in authority.

There is abundant information to suggest that the *shabiha* have resorted to self-funding through plundering, as the regime's financial resources are being exhausted. An important report published by the Local Coordinating

Committees in October in 2011 says that *shabiha* militias in Tel Kalakh had engaged in acts of "destruction and the theft of citizens' possessions, such as jewellery". In Ruston, the report states, "the *shabiha* and state security have plundered shops and stores, stealing valuable appliances and carrying them away in their trucks." In other words, they are treating the property of ordinary citizens as booty, legitimately obtained in the regime's war against society.

There are also reports of random arrests in other regions, Idlib in particular, which are carried out with the aim to extort money in return for the prisoners' freedom¹⁹.

6

This overview is undoubtedly in need of more detailed information from the field, but it seems clear that *tashbih* ("*shabiha*-ness or thuggishness") is an innate characteristic of the regime, a tendency to which it reverts in time of crisis, becoming in the process a *shabih* that looms over the nation as a whole.

This was particularly evident in the 1980s, when the majority of the country was governed through *tashbih*. The *shabiha* themselves continued their stranglehold on Latakia, while a similar, though less flagrant, phenomenon was seen in other regions. The *shabiha* then were the shadow of the Assad regime, stronger and darker the closer they clung to Syria's true centre of power.

We can assert a directly proportional relationship between the rule of *tashbih* and the spread of the *shabiha*. The more the regime acts as a *shabih* the greater the number of *shabiha* willing to work for it and give it their undivided loyalty in exchange for certain privileges: immunity, promotion, preferences at schools and universities²⁰, not to mention direct wages, such as the booty acquired in fighting the current revolution.

From the mid-1990s up until the outbreak of the revolution, the *tashbih*-style of governance gradually declined, and with it the activities of the *shabiha* themselves. But they were not gone for ever; rather, they had retreated into the fortress of instinct, unseen but present: ready to reemerge into public life at any moment. And this is

precisely what transpired. When the revolution broke out the *shabiha* and *tashbih* instantly reappeared.

The practical consequence of all this is that if the regime wins its confrontation with the uprising, the system of government in Syria will become dominated by *tashbih*. The country will be ruled by the *shabiha* and we shall come to witness levels of brutality and preferential treatment more severe than those of the 1980s. If the revolution is crushed there will be no “reform” of any kind, but a return to the fascist *tashbih* we are so familiar with. The present regime knows no other way to rule. When people submit to it, it makes them slaves; when they rise up against it, it kills as many of them as it can. The *shabiha* can only be finished off for good by bringing down the regime.

Last August, in the Talbisa district of Homs, demonstrators chanted:

“We want a civil state that governs us, not a shabiha state that murders us!”

7

In the meaning we have used it above, *tashbih* refers to the policies and political behavior that characterized not only the Syria regime of Hafez al-Assad but the Baathist regime from its inception.

The severity of *tashbih* has an inverse relationship with the popular legitimacy of the regime. Aware of their lack of legitimacy the Baathists quickly resorted to what we might call “ideological *tashbih*”: in other words, flinging accusations of disloyalty and betrayal in every direction and working hard to foster an atmosphere of general paranoia, in which the majority of the population are put permanently on-guard against the many and various conspiracies supposedly being hatched against it. The patriotism of every citizen can be called into doubt at any instant. The world around him is a sinister, dangerous place, to be guarded against and mistrusted.

This ideological *tashbih* is a primary cause of the weakening of critical thought and dissent in Syria, but it is not a Syrian invention, nor a Baathist one. In all likelihood, it has something to do with the need to bolster poor

social cohesion with abstract and absolutist ideologies. Under the Baathists this mode of thought was elevated to the rank of state policy, reaching its apogee with the uncoupling of its public discourse from reality. The Baath regime pursued this policy against Israel until the terrible defeat of June 1967. It continued to assert its nationalist, socialist nature to everybody else, tearing Syrian society to shreds, afflicting the Palestinians and Lebanese and enriching their followers, and causing one of the most progressive societies in the Arab world to become backward and stagnant.

Ideological *tashbih* corrupted the Arabic language, political discourse in particular. The language became more dishonest and meaning became uncoupled from reality, depriving the population of their chief tool for voicing their complaints and demands. The only acceptable mode of expression became the language of governance, which was designed first and foremost to deprive the governed of an independent means of expression.

This lack in means of expression may have played a role in the physical manifestations of protest that constitute the basic “language” of the uprising. Verbal protest, especially in classical Arabic, carries a high risk of contamination with regime discourse. That this has always been the traditional opposition’s preferred mode of expression accounts for its fundamental weakness and impotence. The fact that many of those in the traditional opposition have been detained and tortured has meant that their bodies no longer play a part in their struggle against the regime. Their generation—which is mine—have nothing but words. We are an opposition of ghosts, souls detached from their bodies, who weightlessly confront a muscle-bound regime studded with wagging tongues. Because of their ghostlike nature, not one member of the traditional opposition has been killed as yet and only a few have been detained.

The new opposition push the revolution forward with their bodies. They put their bodies on the line and so far over 10,000 of these bodies have been destroyed²¹.

The regime’s appropriation of the common language has also played a part in the demonstrators’ distancing their slogans and chants from the discourse and clichés

of official discourse. One cannot separate oneself from the regime unless one makes a break with its language and symbolism. This is a point that those calling for the Syrian revolution to adopt overtly “nationalist” positions and slogans have entirely failed to appreciate. They miss two important points. The first is that the regime’s slogans are in essence *tashbih* and have so little basis in reality that they have murdered the very concept of truth itself. Debate is thus limited to a range of ideological preferences all equally divorced from reality and thus entirely self-contained and solipsistic. No sooner had the Arab League announced that it was barring Syria from participating in its meetings on December 11, 2011, spokesmen were appearing on Syrian state television talking about “backward Bedouin” and declaring that Syria was a self-contained nation-state that had nothing to do with “Arabs”. Outside in the street, regime loyalists chanted, “Screw pan-Arabism!”

The second point is that the revolution is an attempt to achieve a complete break from the regime. Things might change, and the revolution may come to take a different approach to certain issues, but in my view this fundamental characteristic is set in stone: the revolution is striving for separation.

8

The regime, which relies on the *shabiha* to govern the Syrian interior, itself acts as a *shabih* on the regional stage: a thug that rules by terrorizing those around him. Representatives of the regime, especially in Lebanon, are a genuine *shabiha*: violent, corrupt, thuggish and working hard to “*shabiha-ize*” Lebanese politics and the Lebanese state. In other words, they seek to clone themselves and their methodology in Lebanon and thereby rule for ever, just as they have done in Syria. The most recent of these representatives was Rustum Ghazzali (head of the military security branch in rural Damascus), a man who in 2005 was considered for leadership of Syria’s “anti-terrorism unit”, itself a classic instance of Orwellian language.

More important even than this process of *shabiha*-ization was the accumulation of wealth by force. In Lebanon, the phenomenon transcended the tactics of the Syrian *shabiha*, old and new, becoming an economic system

based on plunder, extortion and forced labour. In other words: force as an economic principle.

The newly wealthy Syrian elite who had transformed the Syrian economy into a social-market economy in 2005, were no different to their fathers who had accrued their fortunes through the abuse of political power. They called their new policy “development and modernization” but its aim was the same: vast wealth and absolute power. It was just less brutal. When the revolution broke out, these modernizers made a rapid return to the tried and tested tactics of their fathers’ generation²².

The fact is that the “new feudalists” who control the Syrian economy today have made their money through what we might call “grand *tashbih*”, as opposed to the “minor *tashbih*” from which the rank-and-file *shabiha* earn their daily crust. The foot soldiers attack opponents of the regime and the revolutionary masses in exchange for wages and booty. They are mercenary forces fighting for the regime. Their big-time counterparts, on the other hand, use the state and the regime and make billions from it. They are the ones who are confronting the revolution with unrestrained violence. The “grand *shabiha*” are the ones who rule Syria.

Thirteen months into the revolution they have shown not the slightest inclination to change their approach—the forcible submission of their opponents—nor to reconsider the way the state is structured. The *shabiha* state is a state like those described by Ibn Khaldoun: it has a lifespan; it flourishes then it passes away. It will not negotiate, it will not practice politics and it is incapable of reforming itself. Perhaps, though, unlike the states of Ibn Khaldoun, it will not live to see a century.

9

What do all these forms of *tashbih* have in common? The use of raw force to govern, both domestically and regionally, without any proper form of democratic representation? An ideological discourse divorced from reality and realistic possibilities? The accumulation of wealth through the state with utter disregard of the law?

The answer is separation.

The separation of gain from effort, of words from their meanings, of positions from qualifications and aptitude. In its essence, *tashbih* negates the value of work and the laws that link labour to income and production to wealth. It prevents the production of intelligible discourse. It prevents the practice of a politics that generates representation and binds private interests with the wider interests of the state.

In another sense it is about preventing representation: the representation of citizens in political structures, the representation of the value of labour in income, the representation of meaning in words.

The *shabiha* is simultaneously a model of material production (it does not produce wealth, but appropriates it), a system of political governance (which practices repression not politics) and a construct for meaning (which produces no new meanings). It is production without labour, rule without representation and meaning without any objective referent.

The Syrian revolution, therefore, must strive to redefine labour as the true measure of material and moral worth, make representation and the administration of society's interests the true measure of a government's legitimacy and ensure that ideas and ideologies are assessed on the basis of their relationship with reality. In other words, we must reassess production: material, moral and political. This is the true core of the grand project before us, and all three of its component pieces must be given equal weight, not just the political.

Translated by Robin Moger.

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Endnotes

- 1 <http://harpers.org/archive/2011/06/hbc>
- 2 Adwan, Mamdouh. *Hayawanat al-Insan*, Mamdouh Adwan Publishing, Damascus 2007, p.134.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Adwan Mamdouh. *Hayawanat al-Insan*, p.134. Adwan describes the *khaal* as the "umbrella of the *shabiha*"; he is "above the law" and "he usually earns his position because he is the son or relative of an official." (p.138)
- 5 In 1993 a struggle broke out in Latakia between the *shabiha* of Fawaz al-Assad (Hafez Assad's nephew – son of his younger brother Jamil) and the Deeb clan's *shabiha* (led by Rebah Deeb, whose mother is from the al-Assad clan). Rebah Deeb was incarcerated in Latakia Prison but his *shabiha* attacked the building and freed their leader, killing several policemen in the process. Because there are so few written sources available I rely for much of my information on friends

- and acquaintances. I only pass on stories that seem credible and are confirmed by more than one source.
- 6 Hasaan al-A' sar was killed in 1994 for defending a girl who sought his protection from the *shabiha* on a public bus.
- 7 Compare with: *Milishiyat al-Shabiha: Quwat Khasa fawqa al-Qanoun (The Shabiha Militias: Special Forces Operating Above the Law)*, al-Sharq al-Awsat: <http://aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=11823&article=616865&feature>
- 8 Roza Yassin Hassan, 'An al-Shabiha, wa Sadatihim wa Dhakira bi-Lawn al-Khawf (On the Shabiha, Their Leaders and a Memory the Colour of Fear), 6th Nov 2011, <http://www.aleftoday.info/content/نوع-فوخ-ال-نولب-ترك-انوم-مجتداس-و-حي-تبشرا>
- 9 Adwan, Mamdouh. *Hayawanat al-Insan*, p.135
Adwan was perhaps the only Syrian author to write about the *shabiha* before the revolution. In this passage he states: "Tashbih is a term that is rich in meaning. It refers to a blend of outlawry, *salbata* and *taballi*; to all that openly defies the law."
- 10 In the summer of 1997 I attended a university-run military training camp. A Baathist student accused the lieutenant in charge of uttering sectarian statements because he had made a joke about people from Homs. He grabbed the man by his collar and screamed, "I'm a member of the security detail for the regional command!" into the man's face.
- 11 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kVZk_VMWJsg
- 12 Adwan, Mamdouh. *Hayawanat al-Insan*, p.136
The *shabih* and the smuggler are not the same. The smuggler is "brave, he takes risks and chances danger and can come into conflict with the state," while the *shabih* uses a government car and smuggles in broad daylight, holding up passers-by in crowded streets." The difference lies in the immunity afforded the *shabih* by the state.
- 13 In 2005, led by Nimir al-Assad, they attacked the al-Haram Currency Exchange Company in Damascus in broad daylight and made off with all the cash on the premises. In Adra Prison in 2006 they were responsible for extorting money from, and informing on, political prisoners.
- 14 Ahmed Beydoun writes about the connection between patronage and sectarianism in Lebanon in a number of his books.
See: Beydoun, Ahmed. *Mughamarat al-Mughayera: al-Lubnaniyoun Tawa'if wa Araban wa Fainiqiyoun (Adventures in Difference: the Lebanese are Sects, Arabs and Phoenicians)*, 1st Edition, al-Nahar Publishing, Beirut 2005, p.20
- 15 <http://all4syria.info/web/archives/19669>
- 16 There can be no doubt that the growing militarization of revolution will alter the situation, either causing the *shabiha* to retire from the conflict, or more alarmingly, to arm themselves more extensively.
- 17 Known funders of the *shabiha* in Latakia include businessman Nizar As'ad, who was added to an EU sanctions list on August 24, 2011, along with Mohammed Jaber who was described by the EU as Colonel Maher al-Assad's aide, tasked with assisting the *shabiha*. See the following link: http://www.levantnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8832:2011-08-24-15-25-04&catid=81:syria-politics-headlines&Itemid=55
- 18 <http://all4syria.info/web/archives/19669>
- 19 This information was taken from the Facebook page of Ismaeel Al-hamed, a doctor from Jabal al-Zawiya in Idlib, on August 28, 2011. The sums mentioned vary between 25,000 lira (about \$430) and one million Syrian *lira* (about \$17,450). It seems there is some sort of brokerage system involved. Those who do not pay are suspended until further notice. See: <https://www.facebook.com/Ismaeel.alhamed?ref=ts>
- 20 In the regime's first war against the Syrian people, which ran from 1980, members of the Defence Brigades of Rifaat al-Assad, special forces under the command of Ali Haidar and the 4th Armoured Brigade under Shafiq Fayad, placed their pistols on their desks during middle school and high school exams and openly cheated on their tests. No one was brave enough to stop them. In the same year, extra marks began to be awarded to members of the armed student brigades, which fought for the regime and their entry into the university departments of their study preferences was facilitated. Naturally they were appallingly behaved and weak students and many Syrian university professors today are drawn from their ranks. It was during this period that the artist Ali Far-azat was slapped by a member of the Defence Brigades for sketching a student paratrooper landing on the Medical faculty with his parachute.
- 21 The data issued by Syrian activists, particularly the Local Coordination Committees is more reliable than data from the UN or international human rights organizations. These activists have rigorous standards for extrapolating figures from their data, not to mention being much closer to the revolution. The revolution does not engage in media *tashbih*.
- 22 There are many stories about the regime asking Hafez al-Assad's security officials for help—men like Ali Douba—but such rumours are hard to verify.