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The *Shabiha* of Syria



TRADOC G-2 Intelligence Support Activity
(TRISA)

Complex Operational Environment and
Threat Integration Directorate (CTID)





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Purpose

- To inform the Army training community about the history and characteristics of the Syrian Shabiha.
- To provide information on the relationship between the al-Assad government and the Shabiha.
- To identify the potential threats posed by the Shabiha.

Executive Summary

- The Shabiha is a fanatically pro-al-Assad gang of smugglers, utilized by the al-Assad family for intimidating anti-government dissenters in Syria.
- Members of the Shabiha are recruited based on possession of low intelligence with intimidating physical characteristics, such as steroid-produced muscles and tall stature.
- Members of the Shabiha tend to be young, unemployed men from the suburbs.
- The Shabiha is known for brutal and violent behavior and is feared by ordinary Syrians.
- The Shabiha has been implicated in many of the brutal civilian deaths since opposition to Bashar al-Assad began in 2011.
- Bashar al-Assad may have lost the capability of controlling the violent actions of the Shabiha.
- Bashar al-Assad has distanced himself from Shabiha violence by claiming opposition forces and outside terrorists are responsible.
- Due to its close ties to the al-Assad family, past brutal behavior, and membership in the minority Alawite Islam sect, the Shabiha fears retribution if the al-Assad regime falls.
- Members of the Shabiha are able to justify wide-spread violence against the majority Sunni Syrians because they believe their survival is inextricably tied to the survival of the al-Assad regime.

Cover photo: Member of the Shabiha



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Map of Syria



Introduction

A fanatically loyal pro al-Assad government group known as the *Shabiha* has been linked to and implicated in civilian massacres in Houla and other places in the ongoing Syrian civil war. The *Shabiha* has a longstanding smuggling relationship going back to President Bashar al-Assad's father and at least two of his uncles. This association, cemented by decades of government sanctioning of illegal activities and familial relationships, has morphed the *Shabiha* into a gang of thugs willing to brutally kill civilians in support of the government of Bashar al-Assad. This Threat Report explores who the *Shabiha* is and its involvement in the ongoing conflict in Syria.



A Short History of the Shabiha

The *Shabiha*¹ has come to international attention during the recent conflict in Syria, however, it has been feared by Syrians going back to the rule of Hafez al-Assad in the 1980s. The Shabiha has its roots in mafia-like activities during the Hafez al-Assad regime. The Shabiha is mostly made up of Alawites, the same Muslim sect as the al-Assad family. The Alawites, a small, mystic offshoot of Shia Islam, amount to no more than 12% of the mostly Sunni Syria. This familial relationship and minority status are key components in the fanatical loyalty exhibited by the Shabiha towards the al-Assad regime. The al-Assad regime turned a blind eye to the illegal smuggling operations of the Shabiha and the Shabiha pledged loyalty to the al-Assad family. The minority status of the mostly Alawite Shabiha continues to foster the idea that the ruling al-Assad family and the Shabiha are in a fight against the rest of Syria. This may partially account for the brutal attacks members of the Shabiha are making on Syrian civilians.

The Shabiha is believed to have been established by Namir al-Assad, a cousin of Hafez al-Assad, and al-Assad's brother Rifaat al-Assad as tools of the regime in the 1980s. Each gang was established with a loyalty to a particular member of the al-Assad family. The Shabiha gangs operated with impunity, making exorbitant profits from smuggling Syrian subsidized food, cigarettes, and commodities into civil war torn Lebanon and luxury cars, guns, and drugs back into the economically restricted Syria from Lebanon. With easy access to weapons and protection from the al-Assad government, the Shabiha soon became feared by Syrians. By the 1990s, however, the Shabiha seemed to be getting out of control, requiring a crackdown by Basel al-Assad, Hafez al-Assad's elder son and heir to the Syrian presidency. Soon after the successful crackdown, Basel al-Assad died in a car crash, putting the less militarily competent Bashar al-Assad, an eye doctor at the time, into the presidency.

Bashar al-Assad's direct control over the Shabiha may be questionable, but the loyalty of the Shabiha to the survival of his regime is undeniable. The Shabiha sees its own survival and the survival of the al-Assad regime as inextricably tied together. Shabiha members have more to fear than Syria's security forces due to their violent and brutal past and ties to the Alawite regime. If the al-Assad regime falls, they rightfully fear violent reprisals from brutalized and exploited Sunni Syrians.

¹ Where the name *Shabiha* comes from is not exactly known. The Arabic word "Shabah" means, literally, "ghost." Some say the name came from the 1994 Mercedes S600 class model, known as a "Shabah," that was popular for its smuggling sized trunk.



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Who Are the Shabiha

Members of Shabiha (pictured) have been specifically recruited based on characteristics of intimidation. One doctor, who treated members of the Shabiha, described them as tall, having huge steroid-created muscles, big bellies, bushy beards, and low intelligence. Members of the Shabiha are also universally known for their white trainer running shoes. Their size and brutality have long been feared by ordinary Syrians. In addition to being physically intimidating, the Shabiha has long enjoyed protection from the Syrian government and are well supplied with weapons.



Numbering, by some estimates, about 6,000, the Shabiha has felt the economic pinch. In good economic times, the government supplemented its income from smuggling operations. Pillaging neighborhoods, kidnappings, and robberies have now become commonplace in places like Aleppo. The Shabiha is made up of poor, unemployed young men from the suburbs who feel empowered by the opportunity to make money and carry a Kalashnikov. The ability to operate with impunity has created a formidable extra-military force to terrorize civilians and prevent and punish those who demonstrate against the government.

Taldou, Houla Region Massacre

An example of the violence and tactics of the Shabiha can be seen in the Taldou massacre. The region of Houla is made up of several villages and towns in Homs Province, scene of much of the opposition resistance in 2012. Taldou lies about a mile southwest of the main town, also known as Houla. Houla's villages are predominately Sunni Muslims, but the area is ringed by a number of Alawite villages. These Alawite villages, fearing retribution from their Sunni neighbors after the massacre, volunteered to donate blood for the survivors.



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On 25-26 May 2012, Taldou was the scene of one of the most brutal attacks on civilians seen in Syria. While not conclusively proven, eyewitnesses, activists, human rights groups, and the UN's high commissioner for human rights say Syrian Security forces and the Shabiha are responsible for the deaths of 108 people in Taldou. Witnesses state that the Syrian military began a 2-hour barrage using tank fire and mortars. The attack was followed by the Shabiha conducting house-to-house attacks, brutally killing 49 children, 34 women, and 25 men from 4:00pm to 1:00am using knives and small arms weapons. One witness stated, "I was in a room by myself when I heard the sound of a man. He was shouting and yelling at my family. I looked outside the room and saw all of my family members shot."² Another witness stated that he knew it was the Shabiha and not the military because the attackers were wearing white trainer running shoes and not the military-issued black boots. The Shabiha is believed to have been involved in other similar attacks in support of President Bashar al-Assad's campaign to stay in power.

Analyst Assessment

The Shabiha has given Bashar al-Assad at least the perception of cover for the brutality at places like Taldou. Since the Shabiha operate in civilian clothes, al-Assad can claim the atrocities are not the work of his security forces. Civilians on the ground regularly point their fingers at the Shabiha as the perpetrator of attacks on Syrian civilians. This is consistent with what we know about the Shabiha's past operations and will continue as long as al-Assad remains in power.

The Shabiha will continue to be a formidable and dangerous force in Syria. Members of the Shabiha link their survival with that of the survival of the al-Assad regime. They see other Syrians as a threat and justify any brutality toward them as a battle for their own survival. Having lived under a different moral and social code that has validated and accepted violence and criminal activities, the Shabiha is the perfect extra-military force for the al-Assad regime to use for intimidating the Syrian population. The problem for the al-Assad government, however, is whether or not members of the Shabiha can be controlled and whether their continued acts of brutal violence against the Syrian population plays in al-Assad's favor with the international community, which is increasingly calling for the abdication of President al-Assad.

² Survivor of the Houla massacre, "Houla: How a Massacre Unfolded," *BBC News*, 8 June 2012 (accessed 29 June 2012).



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Training Implications

- The Shabiha is a formidable force on the Syrian battlefield, able to carry out brutal acts of violence and intimidation.
- Characteristics such as extremely large physical features, bushy beards, and white trainer running shoes are identifying features of Shabiha members.
- Having created and crafted the Shabiha over the last few decades, it is not at all certain that the current al-Assad government will be able to control the vast network of Shabiha groups.
- Members of the Shabiha have their own survival concerns that are tied directly to the survival of the al-Assad regime, but those concerns may inspire violent, gang-like behavior that is counter to the al-Assad regime's best interests.

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Related Products

See also the [Red Diamond Newsletter](#), which contains current articles on a variety of topics useful to both soldiers and civilians ranging from enemy TTP to the latest news on cyberspace developments.

For detailed information on weapons and equipment, see the [Worldwide Equipment Guide](#).

AKO: <https://www.us.army.mil/suite/portal/index.jsp>

Threat Products: AKO“Easy-Link”
Contemporary Operational Environment and Threat Integration Directorate

The screenshot shows the AKO Army Easy-Link portal. On the left, there is a login section with fields for Username and Password, and a 'Login' button circled in red and labeled with a '1'. Below this is a 'CAC Login to AKO/DIRD' section. On the right, there is a 'Home' section with a search bar and a 'Files' button circled in red and labeled with a '2'. Below the search bar, there is a 'Favorites' section with a list of links. One of the links, 'TRISA-CTID', is circled in red and labeled with a '4'. A red arrow points from the 'TRISA-CTID' link to a list of search results on the right, which includes 'TRISA-CTID' and other related items. A '3' is placed near the search bar area.

1. Login
2. “Click” Files
3. Search to:
TRADOC G2
TRISA-CTID
4. “Click” & Find !



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