Tashbih: The Logic of Annihilation of the Other

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Abstract

Tashbih, in Syrian vernacular, has long referred to a diverse constellation of practices and acts—invariably illegal and often articulated with violence or the threat of violence—perpetrated by individuals and groups, the *Shabbiha*, with deep (often kin-based) ties to the Baathist regime of President Hafez al-Assad and later his son, Bashar al-Assad. The ebb and flow of the role played by the *Shabbiha* since then and the meaning of *Tashbih* in Syria's political culture has followed closely the fortunes of their patron, the Assad regime. This article will sketch the origins of the term, its underlying practices and antagonisms, and trace the fluctuation and diffusion of its meaning and application particularly following the 2011 uprising in Syria.

Keywords

1 Introduction

The *Shabbiha* (pl. of *Shabbih*, most commonly translated as 'thugs') originally referred to a small group of second-degree Assad family members and their bodyguards who, in their heydays during the 1980s–1990s, raced around the streets of Latakia (and to a lesser extent, Damascus) in their black Mercedes Benz S500 cars (the *Shabaḥ* [ghost], hence the name) engaging in a multitude of criminal activities (profiteering, racketeering, smuggling) with virtual impunity. The mid-1990s and the ascendance of President Bashar al-Assad from 2000 ushered in a period of decline for the *Shabbiha* as the new regime tried to rein in their public excesses, and their traditional 'businesses' declined with the opening of the Syrian economy.

However, the Syrian uprising of 2011 reinvigorated the *Shabbiha* phenomenon, albeit in a completely new garb: as the shock troops used by the regime to eradicate the civil protest movement, especially in the early months of 2011. The meaning of *Tashbih* (the infinitive form of *Shabbiha*) henceforth underwent a quantitative shift as it was mainstreamed throughout the country and began to refer to a much broader class of protagonists. *Tashbih* also underwent a qualitative shift as it seeped into the political and cultural vernacular in Syria, as well as in the broader region. This article will discuss these changes in the nature of the term (as well as its internet variant, e-*Tashbih* [*Tashbih Eleketrony*]) and its place in contemporary political and cultural debates within Syria. Moreover, following on the work of Ismail (2018) and al-Haj Saleh (2017), I will argue that *Tashbih*, as a tool and approach to governance in Baathist Syria, defines a politics of absolute antagonism and eventually culminates in a logic of annihilating the other.

2   The Original *Shabbiha*

– Why do they call it a '*Shabah*' [ghost]?
– Because it disappears in Lebanon and reappears in Syria.

This classic joke from 1990s Syria captures with incredible succinctness that specific historical moment and the political and economic structure where the *Shabbiha* first emerge into Syria's political and popular vernacular.

These original *Shabbiha* initially referred to a small coterie of second-degree relatives of then-president Hafez al-Assad and their bodyguards. Assad's rise to power brought about a radical change in the structure of elite power, where the president's immediate family and clan occupied important positions of power within the security apparatus of the state and beyond (Batatu 1981). The original *Shabbiha* were the most visible outgrowth of that new elite power. The *Shabbiha* bodyguards were recruited almost exclusively from Alawite youth, and thus the violence and fear they inflicted evoked a strong sectarian dimension (al-Haj Saleh 2017). Their name comes from the ghost-like black tinted-windowed Mercedes Benz S500 cars, which they often used in moving or racing around city streets.

During their heydays in the 1980s and until the mid-1990s, these gangs were involved in a range of criminal activities referred to in shorthand as *Tashbih*. *Tashbih* included inter alia acts of harassment, kidnapping, profiteering, racketeering and smuggling, committed with impunity and the tacit approval of the Assad regime, both in Syria and in civil-war Lebanon (where Syria's army had

been stationed since 1976). Smuggling, in particular, was a central activity for the *Shabbiha* and their main source of income (Adwan 2007). The *Shabbiha* circumvented Syria's ostensibly closed economy to illegally smuggle imported (or stolen) goods from Lebanon to Syria (which comprised everything from luxury cars to tobacco and even drugs) and to smuggle state-subsidized goods (especially fuel) in the opposite direction. A typical *Shabbih*, according to Mamdouh Adwan's classic description, was

> a roaming state, or authority, with his own laws informed only by the mood of the moment. And that's whether he's in the face of a police patrol; showboating with the car; getting rowdily drunk at a restaurant or a club; harassing a female university student, teacher, or employee in public; or when the desire hits for car racing with other *Shabbiha*.
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>   2007: 135

The port city of Latakia on the Mediterranean coast was the stronghold and the main residence of the extended Assad family—including several brothers and nephews of Hafez al-Assad, around whom different and competing *Shabbiha* gangs orbited (e.g., Mohammad al-Assad aka 'Shaykh al-Jabal' and Fawaz al-Assad, both nephews of Hafez al-Assad). Latakia was also the scene for many of the excesses, such as those mentioned by Adwan, for that generation of *Shabbiha*. Indeed, when in the late 1980s and early 1990s, heir-apparent to the presidency at the time, Bassel al-Assad, decided to make a spectacle of reining in the *Shabbiha*, he did so through a show of force in Latakia, and by briefly detaining some of their leading members.

That campaign served to limit the most blatant criminal practices of *Tashbih* in public, but it did not aim to challenge their underlying economic function nor dismantle their smuggling businesses. The (relative) decline in these businesses happened as a result of economic reforms ushered in by Bashar al-Assad in the early 2000s, who gradually opened Syrian markets to imports and began lifting state subsidies. Bashar al-Assad's attempts to restrain the *Shabbiha* also seemed to cohere with his express purpose of improving accountability and rooting out corruption, as stated in his first inaugural speech in 2000. However, many of these steps remained tentative and with inconsistent outcomes. Even though the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon closed one of the main spaces where the *Shabbiha* had been active, the normalization of relations with President Saddam Hussein's Iraq in the late 1990s and early 2000s had initiated new opportunities for smuggling. The U.S. invasion of the country, and the chaos that followed, also offered plenty of opportunities for arms smuggling into Iraq—reputedly under the leadership of Shaykh al-Jabal. Nev-

ertheless, these activities were largely conducted outside of public view, and the *Tashbih* of the 1980s seemed, at least for a while, to be kept at bay by the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

3 The Uprising and the Democratization of *Tashbih*

The Syrian uprising that erupted in 2011 reinvigorated the *Shabbiha* phenomenon, created the environment for its wide diffusion beyond its localized origins and catapulted it to regional and international audiences. The regime's primary response to the protests was to activate the (relatively) dormant *Shabbiha* networks, now rapidly and significantly expanded, and utilize them as the principal force to suppress the civil movement (Üngör 2020). This entailed both a sizable enlargement of the *Shabbiha*, and a nationwide spread beyond their traditional stronghold in Latakia. The recruitment of new *Shabbiha*, now financed by a much wider circle of crony businessmen alongside Assad's family members, targeted unemployed youth, martial arts enthusiasts and convicted criminals, among others, primarily from neighborhoods and regions loyal to the regime.[1] Alawites made up the vast majority of this new and rapidly expanding force, but Sunni and Christian *Shabbiha* were also recruited in several regions—the Berri clan in Aleppo being the most prominent example (Pagani 2016). As a result, this new class of *Shabbiha* was not only a significant expansion in terms of numbers but also entailed a movement away from the exclusive roots of its antecedent (al-Haj Saleh 2017).

The earlier loose networks of *Shabbiha*, organized as neighborhood-wide Popular Committees (*Lijan Sha'biyah*) in 2011, were gradually—from 2012-onwards—institutionalized into the so-called National Defense Forces: a state-sanctioned and fully-fledged paramilitary organ (Üngör 2020). This new cohort of *Shabbiha* was thrust into the frontline, alongside the state's security forces, but in front of the military and civilian law enforcement, disciplining and suppressing the protestors. Indeed, some of the most horrific atrocities committed in the first year of the uprising (before becoming increasingly militarized) were perpetrated by the plain-clothed gangs of *Shabbiha* (Amster 2012). Countless videos from that period attest to the *Shabbiha*'s primary role in arrests, beatings, disappearances, torture, and summary executions of peaceful protestors (Üngör 2019).

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1 For an expansive and in-depth account of the emergence and role of the *Shabbiha* in the city of Homs, see Üngör (2020).

The concrete political and economic underpinnings, and meanings, of *Tashbih* also underwent a transformation. Economically, *Tashbih*, besides smuggling, is now also associated with the re-emergence of widespread and systematic protection rackets, the profusion of kidnappings for ransom, as well as the systematic ransacking and theft of property and household goods from rebellious neighborhoods captured by the regime (also known as *Ta'fish*[2]). More generally, the term became unmoored from its localized, personalized, and to a certain extent, autonomous origins, and instead referred more broadly to a state-sanctioned and directed (impersonal) campaign of brutalization against Syrian civilians.

The transformation of rape as part of *Tashbih* is indicative of this shift. Individual incidents of sexual assault were certainly part of the collective memory and mythology of the *Tashbih* from the 1980s–90s, but it was by no means a systematic or regime-sanctioned practice used against the broader populace (with the exception perhaps of the 1982 Hama massacre). During the 2011 uprising, however, rape became a systematic tactic and a menacing weapon of war in the hand of the *Shabbiha* (Forestier 2017).

Moreover, the *Shabbiha*'s purported roles in the gruesome massacres of civilians in Karm al-Zaytoun (Barnard 2012), al-Houla (Nebehay 2012) and others gave *Tashbih* a terrifying and annihilatory undertone. Indeed, the performative aspects of *Tashbih as massacre* in the Syrian uprising, according to Salwa Ismail, cannot be explained by military strategy alone and should be understood as aiming 'to undo the subject' altogether (Ismail 2018: 178).

The wide circulation of videos by activists, and the intense media coverage of the uprising, meant that the *Shabbiha* and their *Tashbih* gained global notoriety as a synonym for unadulterated cruelty (Neggaz 2013). However, in Ismail's account of the role of violence in Assadist Syria, *Tashbih* appears as part of a toolkit of governance in which varieties of violence (from political imprisonment to the massacre) are leveraged by the regime to shape and produce abjectified and acquiescent political subjectivities (Ismail 2018).

Yassin al-Haj Saleh's in-depth exploration of the *Tashbih* logic in Baathist Syria similarly understood *Tashbih* to be a specific and innate approach to governance in Baathist Syria, particularly under the regimes of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad. This approach rested on a practice of politics through violence and economic accumulation through outright siphoning of state assets. The rhetorical translation of this approach, or 'ideological *Tashbih*', according to al-Haj

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2 *Ta'fish Souqs*, where the *Shabbiha* would sell these stolen items, became widespread in towns and cities remaining under regime control.

Saleh, was reflected in the empty gestures of hyperbole and grandstanding that forcefully filled every crevice of public life (2017: 76–78). The logic of *Tashbih* thus rested upon three main spheres of dislocation: an 'economics' of appropriation, a 'politics' of brutalization and a 'rhetoric' of inanity (2017: 81).

The expansion and extension of the *Tashbih* practice on the ground after the uprising can be matched by a parallel expansion of its discursive component, 'ideological *Tashbih*', as regime media became fully mobilized to counter the narratives emerging from the civil movement. Thus, the label '*Shabbiha*' slowly came to encompass celebrities, intellectuals, journalists and other public figures who forcefully aligned themselves with the regime.[3] It became an indicator and a shorthand, particularly in popular parlance and humor,[4] for blind and militant loyalty to the regime—sometimes used even by regime loyalists themselves. This usage of the word *Shabbih* should be seen as part of a broader system of meanings and categories constituted by the uprising, which included the *Menhebbakji* (a more benign regime-loyalist), *Ramadi* (ambivalent or neutral) and *Mundas* (infiltrator, a pejorative that was appropriated by oppositional activists), among others.

4 Mainstreaming *Tashbih*

The transformation of the Syrian conflict brought another wave of expansion to the meaning and usage of *Tashbih* and *Shabbiha*. Their meanings and referents began to expand significantly to other actors, contexts and spheres. As rebel groups and later Islamic fundamentalist groups (e.g., IS) established effective control over certain geographical spaces (e.g., Idlib, Raqqa and the Damascus countryside), their criminal violations became reminiscent of the regime's *Tashbih*, and these militants soon earned the *Shabbiha* designation by critics. Indeed, the massacres committed by armed oppositional groups often seemed

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3   Interestingly, this change also meant *Shabbih* was no longer an exclusively masculine category, and the class now extended across genders. It also began the process of extending this label to non-Syrians who publicly supported the Syrian regime. Tunisian TV anchor Kawthar al-Bishrawi became an infamous example after her appearance on Syrian TV in 2015, where she theatrically embraced a military boot as a sign of her support for the Syrian Army. For a video of the scene, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUv_Q8qV-Zo

4   An infamous example is the so-called '*Shabbih* of the many talents', which was mocked by opposition activists for appearing in numerous Syria TV broadcasts under different identities and in any number of contexts parroting regime propaganda. For a video, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJLCQlXRaqA

to mimic the performative aspects of the regime's *Tashbih as massacre* and its underlying logic of absolute and irreconcilable antagonism (Ismail 2018: 182–188).

Henceforth, different qualifiers and modifiers, often denoting the factional leader's name, were soon added to the word *Shabbiha* to distinguish them. Besides Assad's *Shabbiha*, we now had al-Baghdadi's *Shabbiha* (IS), al-Jolani's *Shabbiha* (al-Nusra Front) and Zahran Alloush's *Shabbiha* (Jaish al-Islam), to name a few. Beyond the Syrian conflict itself, *Tashbih* also became the framework for how violence enacted by other regimes was parsed and understood, whether by Syrians (Neggaz 2013: 29) or other Arabs—as evidenced by its usage by non-Syrian Arabic-language media.[5]

Tashbih also emerges into the digital realm (*Tashbih Elektrony*, or e-*Tashbih*) as a practice of intimidation toward the other; the discursive equivalent of the violence and brutalization of real-life *Shabbiha*. A prominent example was the hacking and harassment campaigns organized by the pro-regime Syrian Electronic Army (Youmans & York 2013). E-*Tashbih*, in this sense, also referred to the active weaponization of social media through troll armies—in a similar fashion to Saudi 'electronic flies' (Loveluck and al-Alwani 2018).

Nonetheless, the broader appeal of e-*Tashbih*, has been to denote the transplantation and adaptation of what al-Haj Saleh (2017) described as 'ideological *Tashbih*' to the social media environment. This included the diffusion of accusations of treason, ad-hominem, demands for ideological purity, grandstanding, hyperbole and online shaming. Notably, this mode of e-*Tashbih* often redirects the violence of the act inward rather than only toward what is recognized as the other—i.e., it also targets groups and individuals that are ostensibly allied. This can be seen in the many and recurring internecine conflagrations within the broader Syrian oppositional sphere, where mutual accusations of e-*Tashbih* are readily exchanged. Indeed, several recent high-profile incidents showcase this dynamic whereby discussions and disagreements, whether on matters of tactics[6] or strategical and ideological differences,[7] can devolve into broader 'online brawls' replete with ad-hominem attacks (and accusations and counteraccusations of e-*Tashbih*). Therefore, e-*Tashbih* comes to represent a synergetic confluence between the practices of 'ideological *Tashbih*' and the

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5   Thus, we start to encounter references to Erdogan's *Shabbiha* and Hezbolla's *Shabbiha*.

6   An example are the critiques surrounding some of the legal choices made in the war crimes trial of Anwar Raslan in Germany (specifically the choice of witness testimony) and the reactions to them—both were framed as e-*Tashbih* by the other side.

7   A particularly damaging episode was the so-called 'battle between Syrian secular activists and feminists' (Erhaim 2017; De Angelis & Badran 2018).

dynamics of debates on platforms such as Facebook (where many of these conflagrations have taken place), whose underlying architecture and affordances tend to encourage clustering and polarization (Badran & De Angelis 2021).

5   A Final Word

What this brief overview demonstrates is the expansion and diversification of both *Tashbih* (as concrete political and discursive violence) and the increased ubiquity of the term to describe an ever-growing variety of actors in different contexts and spheres since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011. How can we make sense of this transformation and multiplication of the meanings and referents of *Tashbih* in Arabic and Syrian vernaculars?

I would argue that the underlying thread connecting this expanded terrain of *Tashbih* is a critique (or, in a minority of cases, a celebration) of a politics defined by absolute antagonism (Carpentier 2018). Such an antagonism, according to Carpentier, building on the work of Chantal Mouffe and Carl Schmitt, discursively unfolds along three main nodes: '1) the need for destruction of the enemy, 2) a radical difference and distance from the enemy, combined with (and supported by) a process of 3) homogenization of the self' (2015: 148). The underlying logic of *Tashbih* is the resolution of such antagonism through annihilation of the other or enemy (see Ismail 2018: 184) and an absolute homogenization of the self ('ideological *Tashbih*' in al-Haj Saleh's formulation). Ironically, it might be this zero-sum logic that made *Tashbih*, in its latest transformation, a much-used term amongst tribal football fans on Arabic Twitter.

Nevertheless, the profusion of *Tashbih*, and its expanded usage, as explored in this article, should not be seen as tantamount to the naturalization of that logic. Indeed, as Ussama Makdisi reminds us in his work on sectarianism (another potentially absolute antagonism), every history of sectarianism is also—almost by definition—a history of anti-sectarianism and attempts at co-existence (2019: 1). In the same vein, we should also see in the profusion of the term's usage, a concrete critique and rejection of that politics—even if in most instances the critique does not yet elaborate on what an effective counter-politics might be.

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