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## Report

# Pro-Regime Militias in Syria: SAA Unit or Ad-Hoc Apparatus?

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**Armed pro-Assad militiamen surround mourners walking in the funeral procession of a young woman, Noura al-Zahraa, shot by security forces in April 2012 [AP]**

## Abstract

Within a few weeks of the Assad regime's first attack on peaceful protestors in the Dar'aa province, foreign media outlets began reporting on crimes perpetrated by shabiha, often translated as "thugs" and referring to domestic pro-regime militias accused of looting, destroying private property, and indiscriminate, often deadly, assaults on civilians. While their existence is not tied to the Syrian revolution, their support for the Assad regime since the start of the revolution has been clear and unmistakable, and their purpose has been anything but ad-hoc. Similar militias are emerging as the revolution continues, many local in nature and claiming to act as neighbourhood watch groups. This report examines the history of these groups, discusses the most prominent of them, and explains their future role based on their current activities in Syria. It is important to note that this report only focuses on domestic pro-regime militias or paramilitaries – Iranian and Iraqi militias and Hezbollah mercenaries supporting the Assad regime, for example, are not covered in this report.

## Introduction

Dozens, if not hundreds, of YouTube videos have been uploaded from Syria since 2011 with armed men chanting slogans such as, "Assad or we will burn the country", as they torture civilians or loot shops and homes. In many of these videos, the perpetrators also state they are "Assad's men", although they are often dressed in civilian clothing with no Syrian army insignias. The start of the Assad regime's attacks on peaceful protestors in March 2011 was followed by foreign media reports of shabiha, or domestic pro-regime

militias, attacking civilians and generally acting as an additional arm of the Assad regime and the Syrian Arab Army (SAA). While shabiha, often translated as “thugs”, existed before the start of the Syrian revolution, there has been an upsurge in the formation of domestic pro-regime militias since the revolution began under a number of different umbrellas, including the now well-known National Defence Forces (NDF or Quwat ad-Difa’a al-Madani). Their activities are a clear indication they are not simply an ad-hoc apparatus but rather an institutional component of the Assad regime and its army. This report briefly examines the history of these domestic pro-regime militias, discusses the most prominent of them, and explains their future role based on their current activities in Syria. It is important to note that this report only analyses domestic pro-regime militias or paramilitaries – Iranian and Iraqi militias and Hezbollah mercenaries supporting the Assad regime, for example, are not covered in this report.

## History

Since the shabiha are a key pro-regime militia, this section will focus briefly on their origins and how such groups gained power in Syria. Scholars tend to trace the shabiha’s origins to 1970s smuggling rings established with Hafez Al-Assad’s tacit approval during Syria’s occupation of Lebanon. (1) A combination of wealthy businessmen and relatives of the Assad family, the shabiha worked and continue to work under the country’s well-known and much-feared mukhabrat or security apparatus. While mostly Alawites joined the shabiha, as years passed, the militia began to include Sunnis as well as other minorities, including Christians. (2)

The term is often translated as “ghosts,” from the root “ashbaah,” the literal word for ghosts in Arabic. However, there are several other definitions used to explain the term’s origins: some scholars say it is because members of these groups “live in the shadows”, others say it is derived from the Mercedes model many senior shabiha used to drive, while still others say the name is derived from the Arabic word for shadow, because it broadens when an individual stands tall. (3)

During Hafez al-Assad’s reign, he put down an uprising in 1980 by employing three strategies: selective deployment of majority Alawite groups, raising pro-regime militias to support the army and deploying armed forces to heavily populated areas. (4) Bashar al-Assad has largely followed his father’s strategy, particularly the second part of it, taking advantage of the fact that the Ba’ath party had ensured its supporters were armed and trained through local, affiliated organisations. (5) These paramilitaries were so important to the regime’s strategy that Hafez al-Assad was directly involved in recruiting young men and women to join them, and this was a key stepping stone for them to gain power across Syria. (6)

## Off-shoots

As the popular uprising continued, and with the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) has found itself stretched thin. While there is documented evidence of foreign mercenaries from Iran, Iraq and Lebanon providing manpower to the SAA, defections and deaths of SAA soldiers have created the need for more able-bodied fighters, particularly at the local level. This has allowed for existing groups, such as al-Lijan ash-Sha'biyah, to expand their activities and broaden their role of support to the SAA. On the other hand, there has also been the creation of new groups by the regime, such as the now well-known Quwat ad-Difa'a al-Madani or National Defence Forces (NDF), which promise members higher salaries than regular soldiers, according to several sources. (7) In addition to higher salaries, the NDF members are highly trained and more organised than the more local shabiha gangs – in addition, activists on the ground allege that members of this paramilitary were trained by Iran. (8) With fighting intensifying in Latakia, analysts began to see the emergence of yet another pro-regime militia there, Suqoor al-Sahra, translated as “Desert Falcons”.(9)

In al-Yarmouk camp and others areas close to the capital city of Damascus, the Popular Command for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (al-Jabha ash-Sha'biya li tahrir Falasteen al-Qiyada al-'ama), based in Syria and founded in the 1960s by Ahmad Jibril, has played a role in supporting the Assad regime's army as well. On Sunday, 23 March 2014, this paramilitary group attacked an aid convoy attempting to deliver food aid to besieged al-Yarmouk camp. (10)

Fadl Muhammad Ali, an engineering student who left his studies to join the revolution against the regime, says the pre-existing groups have seen a broad expansion of their authority after the start of the revolution – prior to the uprising, groups like the Lijan, Jaish al-Majd and mukhabarat (security forces) were the regime's eyes and ears, spying on Syrian citizens and taking that information back to the government's intelligence forces. (11) “Before, their role was limited to spying on citizens and keeping tabs on their activities – they were an investigation rather than an implementation tool,” he explained. (12)

Alexia Jade, currently residing in Damascus and working for the Damascus Media Office, said Al-Lijan ash-Sha'biyah tend to be local “People's Councils”, some of which existed before the revolution, and they are almost always closely linked to Assad and the shabiha. (13) Their activities typically include setting up checkpoints and raiding local homes and businesses, and they are usually armed. (14)



## Currently, four key roles

Groups like the shabiha have seen their role expand as the revolution enters its fourth year. While they have always operated "above the law", untouchable by even "legitimate" law enforcement, (15) daily battles and chaotic local conditions have given pro-regime militias even broader powers to kill, loot and attack civilians. Furthermore, the Syrian army is now stretched thin, meaning that it can only focus its manpower on key frontlines in order to maintain strategic territories. (16) Thus, the role of pro-regime militias can be divided into four key areas: armed support for regime offensives in strategic areas, local implementation of the regime's scorched earth policy, creating a general environment of suppression and terror among civilians, particularly secondary and university students, and finally, a way to divert blame for massacres and other violence away from the regime. It should be noted that members of these groups have also admitted to being paid for their crimes. (17)

### **Armed support for regime offensives**

As the regime fought for key areas in Homs, they relied on support from Hezbollah and Iranian forces as well as their own, domestic pro-regime militias. In one incident, members of al-Lijan in Homs reportedly extra-judicially executed seven Sunni men who were working on reconciliation efforts in the city. (18) Alexia Jade, currently in Damascus, says the shabiha were the first line of local suppression when peaceful protests started across the country – their task was putting down any peaceful demonstrations with force, ensuring that other citizens would be too intimidated to participate in future protests. (19,20)

### **Local implementation of regime's scorched earth policy**

On more than one occasion, the regime's pro-regime militias have been actively involved in implementing the regime's scorched earth policy, simultaneously destroying infrastructure and homes and killing civilians. One such incident was the Houleh (or Holah) massacre that occurred with UN monitors mere kilometres away. On 25 May 2012, the UN confirmed that at least 108 men, women and children were killed in opposition-controlled villages, mainly summarily executed. (21) The UN later released a report confirming that the perpetrators were a combination of Syrian Arab Army (SAA) troops and shabiha. (22)

### **Inciting terror**

When Bashar al-Assad began his campaign for the latest presidential elections mid-2014, students at Damascus University reported being stopped by regime supporters on campus as well as pro-regime media and being harassed about their opinions and

candidate choice. This is in line with a culture of verified arbitrary raids of dormitories and subsequent detentions of students without warrants or cause. In January 2013, Assad forces began to attack Aleppo University in retaliation for peaceful, student-led anti-regime protests. (23) Students who witnessed the attack said they saw regime planes shelling the university, but what is significant here is what shabiha did immediately after the attack which killed at least 87 – campus security closed the university's gate, trapping students inside, and shabiha began an impromptu protest in support of Bashar al-Assad – a protest amid a scene of bodies and blood, further terrifying the students who had witnessed the attack and preventing them from getting medical attention. (24)

Other ways of inciting terror include documented rapes and sexual assaults on women, young girls and even men and boys both in prisons and in towns and cities invaded by regime forces. A captured member of the shabiha admitted to a Telegraph reporter that he himself had committed at least one rape, telling her, "The government gave me 30,000 Syrian pounds per month and an extra 10,000 per person that I captured or killed. I raped one girl, and my commander raped many times. It was normal". (25)

### **Diverting blame away from regime**

In May 2013, pro-Assad paramilitaries committed what is now known as the Baniyas massacre in which up to 450 civilians were confirmed killed. Later on that year, the UN released a report which stated, "Testimonies were consistent that members of the National Defence Forces were actively involved in the raids and in many cases leading them. Accordingly, there are reasonable grounds to believe that government forces and affiliated militias including the National Defence Forces are the perpetrators of the al-Bayda (Baida) massacre". (26) While the UN came to these conclusions after intense investigation, the regime used this as an opportunity to divert blame from the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), accusing armed groups of committing the massacres.

### **Future role**

For now, the regime's paramilitaries have guaranteed their job security. If factors on the ground remain the same, and the US and other members of the international community continue to pursue a "wait-and-see" strategy in Syria, regime paramilitaries will continue to operate as the regime's legitimate "spare muscle" in Syria. (27) However, the question remains of what will happen to these groups when and if the regime is removed. There are two likely scenarios that could emerge, and a third, less likely scenario. The first is that these groups could be inherited by the next regime, only to result in a Sudan-like situation, with regime paramilitaries making demands of any new government in order to maintain their "legitimate" position in society. (28) The second is

that these groups could continue to act in the background in order to prevent the success of any new regime. This is particularly true of those whose loyalty was to the Assad family itself rather than just to power and material benefits of being a member in such groups. Such a scenario would mean that crimes typically committed by pro-regime militias, including murder, theft and general terrorism, would continue to increase, interrupting any possibility of a smooth democratic transition.

Syrians who have lived under the Assad regime and experienced life under pro-regime militias envision a third scenario, one that is far more difficult to implement, given that it needs both time and the international community's full cooperation. Al-Hamadee believes that these groups will be disbanded and then indicted and prosecuted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) as part of any transitional justice plan. (29) Ali believes that they will weaken in the absence of the Assad regime but that justice must be served in any future Syria, both in terms of domestic law and international justice. (30) Alexia, who says she first noticed the clear distinction between shabiha and other members of society when she enrolled in public school as a child, says that she believes that they will try their best to wreak havoc on the country before either choosing to leave or being forced to do so by the opposition. (31) For her, it is impossible to imagine a Syria with the presence of the Shabiha or other similar groups, because it will pose a threat to the democratic transition process and stability post-Assad. (32)

### Further research

This report has traced the origins of domestic paramilitaries and pro-regime groups in Syria as well as provided future scenarios for their role in a Syria with or without Assad. Since there are a number of foreign militias supporting the Assad regime's crackdown on dissent, future research should focus on how these groups are interacting with the Assad regime's domestic supporters, particularly in planning military operations and post-battle scenarios in which the Assad regime overtakes key cities, such as al-Qusayr. Another dimension of research should focus on other activities by these groups, including whether or not they are involved in civil society and public services sectors once they take control of an area. Although it is difficult to verify information on these groups, it is also important to better understand their demographics, reasons individual members support the regime and whether or not they have changed after the revolution. It is likely that as the conflict's timespan increases, there will be more recruitment of younger paramilitary members as well as increased participation of women in such groups. Research should be done about their presence in other countries and their assaults on those protesting the Assad regime, with reports of such attacks surfacing in Houston, Michigan and New Jersey.

Finally, there is a great deal of room for comparative studies of other groups with similar characteristics in other countries. For example, the Iranian Basij is a pro-regime militia which can be studied in comparison with the shabiha and other such groups, creating a better framework for understanding and identifying such groups' roles in times of war and peace.

For now, the shabiha and other pro-regime forces will continue to play a strong role in Syria, supporting the regime with their criminal activities while simultaneously terrorising Syrian citizens. Should the regime fall or be replaced, their role will depend on who replaces the Assad regime and whether or not the international community is willing to pursue members of these formations in the International Criminal Court (ICC) as part of a transitional justice plan. Some of these groups existed before the Syrian uprising began; however, they played the role of the regime's eyes and ears rather than a key source of manpower for the Syrian Arab Army.

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**Endnote:**

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- 7) For example, see this YouTube video of a captured regime soldier here, taken 1 July 2014 in Aleppo by a Shaam News Network (SNN) reporter. At around 10:50 of the footage, the soldier starts stating that while his salary was 700 Syrian pounds a month, soldiers with the NDF received between 20,000 to 30,000 Syrian pounds per month: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uZsZM1S0f0>.
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- 12) Ibid.
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- 14) Ibid.
- 15) Legitimate law enforcement here is used quite loosely and refers to Syria's police force. Many of them continue to be loyal to the Assad regime.



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