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# The New Authoritarians: Ruling Through Disinformation

## Assad's "As If"

### Executive Summary

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Bashar Al-Assad's use of propaganda is built on the legacy of his father, Hafez, who intertwined his image with that of the state and ruled through a combination of fear, violence and perpetuated national fictions. The main aim of the state propaganda machine was to ensure that citizens at least superficially parroted its politics of 'as if', rather than to alter people's genuine convictions.

Bashar came to power in 2000, and initially appeared to be a comparatively moderate reformer, not least because he helped establish the Internet in Syria. The logic underpinning the regime, however, was the same; in March 2011 a group of teenagers who spray painted slogans from the Egyptian revolution on walls in Deraa were tortured by the security services. Protests erupted that quickly spread to other parts of the country. Assad's response lacked any attempt at reconciliation or substance, and reinforced the familiar rhetoric that Syria was subject to a great global conspiracy. Since then, his speeches have only tried to appeal to his existing supporters.

In May 2015, the state-controlled Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), carried headlines that celebrated the regime's supposed strengths and abilities, ignoring the fact that the Syrian pound was plummeting in value and that rebels had captured a provincial capital. Syrian citizens are allowed access to a number of independent media sources—this is not the stereotypical behaviour of an authoritarian government. Instead, the state's channels, plus a number of Russian-backed outlets, continue to muddy the waters of news reporting, trying to confuse the population and diminish their trust in all news sources. This has caused incredible damage to credible reporting, which is only exacerbated by the opposition, who themselves have falsified a number of stories.

In much of the Middle East, state authority is just as much performance, symbol and spectacle as it is actual substance. We can also see this in Egypt, where stagecraft plays an important role in Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's strategy to stay in power. Four years of instability since the Arab Spring has created an audience increasingly willing to play into the hands of the politics of 'as if'.