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Your Syria Is My Bahrain

By Mark N. Katz

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The United States and other Western countries have been highly critical of Russia for supporting the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad. There are, however, some uncomfortable similarities between Russian policy toward Syria and U.S. policy toward Bahrain.

Both Syria and Bahrain are ruled by undemocratic minority regimes. In Syria, the Assad regime is drawn from the country's Alawite minority — about 12 percent of the population — which has long suppressed the Sunni majority. In Bahrain, the royal family is drawn from the country's indigenous Sunni minority — about 25 percent of the population — which has long suppressed the Shiite majority.

Russia has long supported the minority regime in Syria, while the United States has long supported the minority regime in Bahrain.

Just as Russia has an important naval installation in Tartus, Syria — indeed, Russia's only base outside the former Soviet Union — the United States has an important naval base in Bahrain, the headquarters for the U.S. 5th Fleet.

There are many reasons why Moscow supports Syria and Washington supports Bahrain. One similarity, though, is that just as Moscow fears that the downfall of the Assad regime could mean the loss of its base in Tartus, Washington fears that the downfall of the Bahraini monarchy could lead to the loss its naval base there.

Moscow sees U.S. support for the crushing of the democratic opposition movement in Bahrain as motivated by Washington's desire to retain its naval base there. Nor does Moscow object to this. In Moscow's view, though, Washington should reciprocate by not objecting to Russian support (which Moscow claims is limited) for the crushing of the Syrian opposition movement (which Moscow insists is less than democratic) so that Russia can retain its naval base in Syria. The fact that Washington is not doing this suggests to Moscow that while the United States seeks to preserve its naval presence in the Middle East, it also seeks to eliminate Russia's.

Moscow may be correct about Washington having a double standard in this instance. But Moscow's proposed solution — that the United States not criticize Russian support for the Assad regime just like Russia does not criticize U.S. support for the Bahraini monarchy — is not right.

Minority rule may last for several decades, but it is inherently unstable. It can only be maintained through repression. But repression only results in hardening the convictions of the opposition.

When the repressed are the majority and the repressors are the minority, it is more likely than not that the majority will eventually prevail over the minority.

By continuing to support repressive minority rule in Syria and Bahrain, respectively, the more likely it is that Moscow and Washington will be seen by the majorities in these countries as willing to see them continue suffering just to maintain their naval bases as well as other geostrategic interests.

The danger, then, is that if transitions to majority rule occur in these countries despite continued Russian and U.S. support for minority rule there, the more likely it is that the new governments will end the naval access that neither Washington nor Moscow wants to lose.

The most uncomfortable similarity of all between Russian support for the Assad regime and U.S. support for the Bahraini monarchy may be the loss of influence in these countries as a result Washington's and Moscow's short-sightedness and their lack of desire to push for a peaceful transition to majority rule.

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