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WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS

About a dozen centuries ago, Greater Syria included the territory known as Lebanon, Jordan and Israel. Syrian nationalists still think of that territory as the ultimate destiny of Syria.

Thus, Syria has never seriously accepted the existence of Lebanon; and has, in fact, never sent a proper Ambassador to that country. Thus, Syria and Jordan remain wary foes. Thus, while Syria would be interested in using the PLO to eliminate the Jewish state in Israel, it would not really be interested in that territory becoming a Palestinian Arab state.

This is the folly of Greater Syria or Greater Anything movements based rigidly on ancient history, and ignoring realities created by centuries of intervening events. Such Greater Land movements guarantee permanent and futile warfare, especially when driven by religious territorial zeal.

It is ironic that Greater Land movements often are mounted in countries which are quite disunited internally. That is the case with Syria, which has a number of sharp clan rivalries and religious group rivalries. The Alawis are an ancient ethnic group which adopted the Islamic faith in the Middle Ages, but form a different Muslim sect than the Sunni majority in Syria. Since it seized power in 1963, the Alawi minority has ruled Syria, amid much bloodshed. Last year, you will recall, several thousand Sunni civilians were massacred in Hama by the Syrian army.

But the Alawi took over in the name of the Ba'ath Party, a pan-Arab party which originated in Syria in the 1930s. The slogan of the Ba'ath Party is "One Arab Nation," which fits rather snugly with the concept of a Greater Syria including what ^{are} now Lebanon, Jordan and Israel. At least it's a beginning.

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"Wheels Within Wheels"

page 2

Of course, there is another wheel operating in the Syrian machinery: hatred of the idea of Israel on Islamic religious grounds. The existence of a Jewish state contravenes the Koran, to say nothing of Jewish control over Jerusalem.

But the Ba'ath Party is more than a pan-Arab and Islamic party, it also calls itself a "socialist" party. Actually, Syria pursues few of the objectives of classic socialism; "socialism" in this case is a euphemism for anti-Americanism and anti-Westernism. Israel, aside from everything else, is seen as the handmaiden of American colonial imperialism. Thus, all the wheels fit with each other: Islamic fundamentalism, pan-Arabism, anti-Westernism, anti-Americanism, and they all mesh with hatred of Israel which Syrian leaders feel can only be resolved by war.

And there is another big wheel out there, importantly engaged with the others -- Syria as the agent of the Soviet Union, which has its own stake in anti-Western and anti-American operations. It is the Soviet wheel which keeps the whole Syrian gear-box turning in some viable fashion.

This is the ominous design of Syrian wheels-within-wheels which is currently blocking the spread of Middle East peace. A "Palestinian State" has nothing to do with it, except as a ploy, and would not survive a Greater Syria in any case. American public officials should continue to be reminded that it is finally an anti-American engine.