

Turkey After Assad: Strategic Gains, Structural Limits, and Implications for Regional Security

Demetrios Tsailas (ret Admiral)

(He has taught for many years, operational planning, strategy, and security, to senior officers at the Supreme Joint War College. He is a member and researcher of the Institute for National and International Security)

Copyright: @ 2026 Research Institute for European and American Studies (www.rieas.gr) Publication date: 7 February 2026

Note: The article reflects the opinion of the author and not necessarily the views of the Research Institute for European and American Studies

Introduction

The fall of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024 has profoundly reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the Levant. Among the regional actors, Turkey is frequently described as the principal beneficiary of this transformation. While Ankara has indeed gained strategic depth in Syria, this perception of Turkey as the “great winner” risks oversimplifying a far more complex reality. Turkey’s influence is real but constrained, and its post-Assad role must be assessed through the prism of regional instability, economic fragility, and evolving great-power competition.

From a security standpoint, particularly relevant to the Eastern Mediterranean and NATO’s southern flank, Turkey’s posture in post-Assad Syria presents both opportunities and risks.

Strategic Gains: Turkey’s Expanded Leverage in Syria

Turkey’s influence in Syria rests on three interrelated pillars.

First, Ankara’s long-standing opposition to the Assad regime, combined with sustained support for Syrian opposition forces, positioned Turkey favorably once the regime collapsed. Unlike Russia and Iran, whose strategic bandwidth has been

reduced by external pressures, Turkey emerged as a proximate, operationally engaged actor with established networks on the ground.

Second, the retreat of Russia and Iran significantly altered the balance of power. Moscow's military focus on Ukraine and Tehran's weakening following Israeli strikes against its regional proxies created a vacuum in Syria's security architecture. Turkey has been quick to exploit this opening, particularly in northern Syria, where it maintains de facto influence through allied militias and border control mechanisms.

Third, the dissolution of the PKK's armed struggle in May 2025 marks a historic shift. For decades, Turkey's Syrian policy was driven primarily by counter-PKK imperatives. The decline, though not yet the full neutralization, of PKK-affiliated structures such as the PYD/YPG reduces Ankara's security anxiety and potentially limits the need for unilateral military interventions across borders.

Structural Constraints: Why Turkey Is Not a Hegemon

Despite these gains, Turkey's capacity to shape Syria's future is sharply limited.

Economically, Turkey is ill-equipped to shoulder the burden of Syrian reconstruction. Persistent inflation, currency instability, and declining foreign investment constrain Ankara's external projection. Large-scale reconstruction will depend on Gulf capital, Western engagement, and multilateral institutions, areas where Turkey is a participant, not a leader.

Politically, the new Syrian leadership under Ahmed al-Charaa is pragmatic and deliberately non-aligned. The choice of Saudi Arabia, rather than Ankara, for the first official foreign visit of the transitional president signals Damascus's intention to diversify its partnerships. This limits Turkey's ability to convert influence into dominance.

Socially and sectarian-wise, Syria remains deeply fragmented. Ongoing mistrust among Alawites, Druze, and other minorities—exacerbated by violent

Copyright @ 7 February 2026 (www.rieas.gr) Athens, Greece

reprisals attributed to factions linked to the Syrian National Army, undermines stabilization efforts. Turkey's association, however indirect, with these forces exposes Ankara to reputational risks, particularly in Europe and among NATO partners.

Implications for the Eastern Mediterranean and NATO

From a strategic perspective, Turkey's Syrian engagement has direct consequences for the Eastern Mediterranean.

1. NATO Cohesion:

The improvement in U.S.–Turkey relations following Donald Trump's return to the White House has reduced bilateral tensions, particularly over Syria and the Kurdish issue. However, Turkey's autonomous foreign policy, balancing Russia, the U.S., and regional actors, continues to challenge alliance coherence.

2. Israel–Turkey Dynamics:

Israel's sustained military operations in Syria, aimed at preventing the re-emergence of Iranian influence, introduce a volatile variable. Ankara's rhetorical and political support for Hamas further complicates relations with Israel, increasing the risk of indirect confrontation or diplomatic escalation.

3. Greek and Cypriot Concerns:

A more assertive Turkey in the Levant may translate into renewed confidence in the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly regarding maritime zones, energy exploration, and naval presence. Greece and Cyprus must therefore interpret Turkey's Syrian posture as part of a broader strategy of regional leverage, not an isolated theater of action.

Refugees and Human Security: A Strategic Variable

The fate of over four million Syrian refugees, constitutes a critical security and political issue. Forced or premature returns risk destabilizing Syria further, while prolonged displacement fuels social tensions inside Turkey. If managed cooperatively, however, this population could become a bridge for economic integration and cross-border reconstruction. If mishandled, it may serve as a catalyst for renewed instability affecting the entire region, including Europe.

Conclusion

Turkey has undoubtedly improved its strategic position following Assad's fall. Yet influence should not be confused with control, nor proximity with leadership. Ankara's role in post-Assad Syria is best described as that of a **necessary but insufficient actor**, one whose success depends on international cooperation, economic recovery, and internal political stability.

For Europe, NATO, and particularly Greece, vigilance is required. Turkey's evolving posture in Syria may reduce certain security threats, such as PKK-related violence, while amplifying others, including regional power projection and ideological polarization. The post-Assad order remains fragile, and its trajectory will shape not only Syria's future, but the security architecture of the Eastern Mediterranean for years to come.

Annex: Naval and Maritime Security Implications of Post-Assad Syria

1. The Levantine Maritime Theater After Assad

The collapse of the Assad regime has not only reshaped Syria's land-based security architecture but has also altered the strategic environment of the **Eastern Mediterranean maritime domain**. While Syria's naval capabilities remain limited, the country's coastline, stretching approximately 180 kilometers, occupies a critical position adjacent to major sea lines of communication (SLOCs), NATO naval routes, and energy corridors.

With the partial retreat of Russia and Iran, the maritime balance off the Syrian coast is in flux. This creates both a temporary reduction in anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) pressure and a longer-term uncertainty regarding who will fill the vacuum.

2. Russia's Naval Retrenchment and the Future of Tartus

The Russian naval facility at Tartus has long been Moscow's only warm-water foothold in the Mediterranean. Since 2022, operational activity has declined, reflecting Russia's prioritization of the Ukrainian theater and the degradation of its naval assets.

While Russia is unlikely to abandon Tartus entirely, its capacity to project sustained maritime power from Syria has been diminished. This reduces direct pressure on NATO naval operations but does not eliminate Russia as a strategic maritime actor. Instead, Moscow may shift toward:

- episodic naval deployments,
- intelligence-gathering missions,
- and asymmetric maritime activities.

For NATO, and especially for Greece, this represents a window of opportunity to reinforce maritime situational awareness and freedom of navigation in the Eastern Mediterranean.

3. Turkey's Naval Posture: From Littoral Defense to Regional Sea Control

Turkey's growing influence in post-Assad Syria must be assessed in conjunction with its expanding naval doctrine, often articulated through the concept of "Mavi Vatan" (Blue Homeland).

While Turkey does not seek direct naval dominance off the Syrian coast, its strategic objectives include:

- securing maritime approaches to southern Anatolia,
- protecting sea-based trade routes,
- and reinforcing its claim to regional leadership across multiple theaters.

Ankara's naval modernization, marked by the expansion of indigenous shipbuilding, drone integration, and amphibious capabilities, provides Turkey with the tools to translate land-based influence into maritime leverage. Control over northern Syria enhances Turkey's strategic depth, indirectly supporting its maritime ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean.

4. Energy Security and Offshore Infrastructure

The Eastern Mediterranean's emerging energy architecture remains vulnerable to political instability and naval disruption. Although Syria itself is not a major energy producer, its coastline lies adjacent to key offshore zones and potential future pipeline routes.

A stabilized Syria could, in theory, facilitate:

- safer maritime transit,
- reduced risks to offshore platforms,
- and improved prospects for multinational energy cooperation.

Conversely, prolonged instability or the proliferation of non-state armed groups could expose offshore infrastructure and commercial shipping to asymmetric threats, including sabotage, missile attacks, or unmanned systems. Turkey's naval presence, therefore, must be viewed both as a stabilizing force and as a potential instrument of coercive diplomacy.

5. Israel, Syria, and Maritime Escalation Risks

Israel's continued military operations against targets in Syria carry latent maritime implications. Escalation on land could spill over into the maritime domain through:

- missile launches toward naval assets,
- drone activity over sea lanes,
- or strikes against coastal infrastructure.

Turkey's strained relationship with Israel—exacerbated by Ankara's political support for Hamas, adds another layer of risk. While direct naval confrontation remains unlikely, miscalculation in a crowded maritime theater cannot be ruled out.

6. Implications for Greece and Cyprus

For Greece and Cyprus, Turkey's enhanced strategic confidence following Assad's fall may translate into:

- increased naval assertiveness,
- expanded patrols,
- and renewed pressure over Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs).

Athens must therefore interpret developments in Syria not in isolation but as part of a broader Turkish strategy of regional leverage. Strengthening maritime alliances with France, the United States, Egypt, and Israel remains essential, as does sustained investment in naval readiness and domain awareness.

7. NATO and EU Maritime Responsibilities

The evolving Syrian theater underscores the need for:

- a reinforced NATO maritime presence in the Eastern Mediterranean,
- enhanced intelligence sharing,
- and EU-led maritime security missions focusing on energy infrastructure and SLOC protection.

Turkey's role as a NATO ally is both indispensable and problematic. While Ankara contributes to alliance security, its unilateral actions and ambiguous alignments necessitate constant strategic calibration.

The Sea as the Next Strategic Frontier

Post-Assad Syria has reduced certain land-based threats but shifted strategic competition toward the maritime domain. Control of the seas, rather than territory alone, will increasingly define influence in the Eastern Mediterranean.

For Turkey, maritime power is the logical extension of its regional ambitions. For Greece and its partners, the challenge lies in preserving deterrence, alliance

Copyright @ 7 February 2026 (www.rieas.gr) Athens, Greece

cohesion, and freedom of navigation in an environment shaped by uncertainty rather than stability.

The naval dimension of the post-Assad order must therefore be treated not as an annex to regional security, but as one of its central pillars.