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POLICY PAPER

FROM SYRIA TO LIBYA

Russia's Adapted Mediterranean Strategy in the Post-Assad Era

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In the two years since the fall of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, Russia has restructured its Mediterranean presence. Although Russia's limited and increasingly conditional access to the Khmeimim and Tartus facilities in Syria has been preserved, its presence in the country has morphed from Assad's 'patron-client' configuration to a more negotiated engagement. Simultaneously, Russia has upgraded its force-projection and logistical infrastructure in eastern Libya, giving it an access path through the Mediterranean to its African theater.

This policy paper argues that these strategic adjustments represent more of a redistribution of Russia's regional stake, rather than an exit from Syria and its replacement with Libya. It maintains that the new geometry has increased both the geographic reach and the risks associated with Russian operations. Thus, Russia's new Mediterranean strategy appears to be a logical adaptation to achieve a less-concentrated and more-elastic posture at the expense of increased reliance on negotiated basing.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Nearly two years on from the swift collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024, Syria remains mired in an uneven and precarious transition. Under President Ahmed al-Sharaa, the nation has inched forward in putting state institutions back together, including by formally establishing and, in July 2026, holding the first sitting of a transitional People's Assembly. These developments, however, occur against a backdrop of considerable structural deficiencies: the territory has yet to be effectively unified; security incidents expose the fragilities of the transition; and reconstruction needs, requiring hundreds of billions of dollars, are immense. Meanwhile, humanitarian suffering is pervasive, affecting about 60% of the country's population¹. In this context, Damascus is struggling to manage relations with a multitude of regional and international actors, and to garner the political and economic support needed to stabilize and reconstruct the country.

No external stakeholder has had to adapt more radically to Syria's political transformation than Russia. As the Assad regime's most critical military and political backer, Moscow appeared poised to lose most of the strategic position it had painstakingly built in Syria over the previous decade. But Assad's overthrow has not obliterated Russian influence in the country. After an initial period of limbo, military downsizing, and diplomatic maneuvering, Moscow has stabilized its position: although diminished, its operational presence, centered on the Khmeimim air base and Tartus naval facility, remains.

In early August 2026, Syria and Russia even concluded a memorandum of understanding on the repositioning of this presence, placing some civilian facilities under Syrian management and providing for the conversion within three months of military installations into joint military training centers². The MoU represents a broader rethinking of the Russia-Syria relationship: instead of returning to the patron-client relationship of the Assad era, the two sides have entered a less far-reaching, more transactional partnership, in which Moscow's military support, training, and supplies, particularly wheat and energy products, are exchanged for a more limited but still strategically valuable presence.

The constraints Russia has faced in Syria have, in parallel, prompted Moscow to bolster its presence in eastern Libya. Russian troops, hardware, and operational infrastructure are increasingly concentrated in areas under the control of forces aligned with Khalifa Haftar, while the presence of Russian personnel—the so-called Africa Corps—offers enhanced opportunities to leverage strategically positioned air bases and potential naval sites. Thus, Libya's growing role in Russia's Mediterranean strategy provides both vital access to the central Mediterranean and a bridge that links Russia's interests in North Africa with its expanding network of connections across sub-Saharan Africa.

This paper suggests that Russia's reaction to the fall of the Assad regime is best interpreted not as a retreat from the Mediterranean, but rather as a strategically orchestrated reallocation

1. European Commission. (2026, May 8). *Syria*. European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations. https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/middle-east-and-northern-africa/syria_en

2. Ramadan, T., Makieh, K., Dalatey, F., & Reuters. (2026, August 9). *Syria and Russia reach deal on future of Tartous and Hmeimim bases after 18 months of talks*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-russia-reach-deal-future-tartous-hmeimim-bases-after-18-months-talks-2026-08-09/>

of its regional presence. The response has two prongs: maintaining a limited yet serviceable position in Syria, while reinforcing its footprint in Libya as a focal point for Mediterranean and African power projection. This shift could have significant consequences, influencing the trajectory of Syria's sovereign reconstruction process, and reshaping the strategic environment along NATO's southern flank, while intersecting with European concerns over energy security, regional stability, and migration.

II. SYRIA TWO YEARS ON

Though the new authorities under President Ahmed al-Sharaa have managed to establish basic institutions and extend their writ across large swathes of Syria, they must still grapple with the legacies of a protracted conflict, dictatorial politics, economic collapse, and external influence. While the Syrian state is recovering institutional and territorial cohesion, its internal security, political, and socioeconomic underpinnings lag behind.

Politically, the current transitional system is based on a five-year Constitutional Declaration established in 2025, centralizing power in the presidency, while providing some of the scaffolding for a transitional administration and a new era. As a sign of the progress of this transitional system toward institutional maturity, the 210-member People's Assembly was constituted in early 2026. Its delegates were put in place through indirect voting procedures across electoral districts, with President al-Sharaa nominating one-third of its members. It includes increased, albeit still limited, female representation, as well as former political prisoners. It held its opening session in July.

Along with the establishment of a Supreme Constitutional Court³, these developments have bolstered the formal institutional framework of the nascent state. These are clear indications of the new government's attempts to transform provisional governing bodies established after the change of regime into long-term institutions of governance. At this stage, however, institutionalization should not be confused with political pluralism. The Assembly remains heavily controlled, due to its structure of indirect elections, and it exists under a highly presidential form of government. Moreover, substantial parts of these institutions, and the government itself, remain staffed by figures associated with the former Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) administration and its local administrative structures⁴. The new political order has therefore yet to provide a broadly accepted form of representation that can generate wider political legitimacy.

The security structure is similar. The government under al-Sharaa has expanded the territory under its authority, reclaiming sovereignty and imposing state control over large parts of the northeastern region, following a successful military operation and a series of political negotiations in early 2026. This has included the integration of Kurdish groups into existing state institutions⁵. Other parts of the country have proved considerably more turbulent, notably predominantly Druze areas of Sweida in the south, where violent clashes between tribal factions and pro-government units in 2025 killed nearly 1,700 people⁶. The area has yet to come fully under the government's control, as the security

3. Syria's Supreme Constitutional Court holds first meeting to discuss draft law. (2026, July 19). *Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA)*. <https://sana.sy/en/syria/2330598/>

4. EUAA, '1. State structure and governance' in *Syria: Country Focus*, July 2026.

5. EUAA, '1.1.3. Developments in the relationship between the transitional government and SDF' in *Syria: Country Focus*, July 2026.

6. Farge, E., & Dalatey, F. (2026, August 9). UN says 1,700 killed in Syria's Suweida violence, cites possible war crimes. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/un-says-1700-killed-syrias-suweida-violence-cites-possible-war-crimes-2026-03-27/>

apparatus remains largely in the hands of relatively autonomous groups that nevertheless coexist, to some extent, with the new Syrian authorities. Israel's continued presence and strikes in parts of southern Syria have contributed to maintaining a degree of tension⁷. Another concern stems from the continuing security risks posed by remnants of Daesh, as demonstrated by bomb attacks in Damascus in July 2026 and incidents in other cities⁸.

The central challenge has therefore shifted as the government seeks to establish a more inclusive security system after bringing many formerly autonomous groups under its authority, particularly Kurdish political and military actors. The government has concluded agreements allowing for a degree of continued autonomy in return for recognition of its authority, as part of a broader effort to form an overarching national system that can incorporate the largest possible share of the country's population⁹.

In the socioeconomic realm, reconstruction remains an enormous challenge. The new government and international organizations including the World Bank have estimated the cost of reconstructing the war-ravaged country at around \$216 billion, with a significant proportion required for rebuilding housing, industry, and damaged infrastructure¹⁰. About 60% of the population, or 15.6 million Syrians, relies on some form of international aid and assistance¹¹. Millions continue to face food insecurity and inadequate living conditions, while large numbers of Syrians remain displaced from their homes because of the war. Major shortages persist, including limited access to food and employment, an unreliable power grid, and inadequate access to basic services, including clean water.

Nevertheless, the al-Sharaa government has made significant progress in facilitating the return of displaced people to their hometowns¹². For those who have not yet been able to return home, there have also been some improvements in general welfare, with the Syrian government engaging international companies to assist in redevelopment and support affected communities, although the needs of large parts of the population have yet to be adequately addressed. International humanitarian assistance continues to fall below the levels anticipated by aid organizations¹³.

These developments indicate that the Syrian economy is beginning to move toward recovery. This could help restore confidence in the country and provide some relief to those affected by the civil war. Damascus has already responded diplomatically by increasing contacts with the United States

7. Gjevori, E. (2026, June 29). New Israeli assault in southern Syria forces families to flee their homes. *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/6/29/new-israeli-assault-in-southern-syria-forces-families-to-flee-their-homes>

8. Al Shaar, Y., Makieh, K., & Achi, C. (2026, July 7). Bomb attack rocks Damascus during Macron visit. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/explosions-heard-damascus-reasons-unknown-witness-says-2026-07-07/>

9. Gebeily, M., & Choukeir, J. (2026, January 30). Syrian government, Kurds agree integration deal, US hails "historic milestone." *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrian-kurdish-led-sdf-agree-ceasefire-phased-integration-deal-with-government-2026-01-30/>

10. Syria's Post-Conflict Reconstruction Costs Estimated at \$216 billion. (2025, October 21). *Syria's Post-Conflict Reconstruction Costs Estimated at \$216 Billion*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/10/21/syria-s-post-conflict-reconstruction-costs-estimated-at-216-billion>

11. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2026, July 21). *OCHA tells Security Council Syria needs a "bridge between relief and recovery."* <https://www.unocha.org/news/ocha-tells-security-council-syria-needs-bridge-between-relief-and-recovery>

12. UN Migration. (2026). POPULATION MOBILITY AND BASELINE ASSESSMENT SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC ROUND 17 – JUNE 2026. In *UN Migration*. <https://share.google/KHseevlzCJGYqPC2t>

13. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2026a). Syrian Arab Republic: 2026 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (April 2026). In *United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*. <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-2026-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan>

and European governments, maintaining its relationship with Türkiye because of its role in both security and economic development, and seeking assistance, cooperation, and potential funding from countries in the Arabian Gulf. It has done so while remaining in communication with Russia over its continued security presence and seeking a U.S.-mediated security arrangement with Israel. This engagement forms part of a broader effort to reduce external dependence by leveraging rivalries and competition between powers including the U.S., Russia, and European countries in pursuit of Syrian interests, potentially contributing to economic recovery, reconstruction, and, ultimately, greater security and stability across the country.

Of course, as long as issues such as full political participation, reconciliation in parts of the country, and broader sociopolitical integration remain unresolved, the road ahead will continue to be challenging for Syria's new leaders.

III. RUSSIA'S ADAPTED ROLE

Russia's engagement with Syria did not begin with Vladimir Putin's 2015 intervention, but it was the decision to deploy Russian air power and military personnel in support of Bashar al-Assad's government that transformed a long-standing Soviet-era partnership into a fully-fledged military footprint. Beginning in September 2015, Russian forces conducted an extensive air campaign from the Khmeimim air base, while Moscow expanded its military infrastructure and consolidated its access to the Tartus naval facility. The intervention proved crucial in shifting the military balance in Assad's favor and established Syria as the principal platform for Russian military power projection in the eastern Mediterranean. The 1971 lease arrangement that first gave Moscow a naval support point at Tartus was upgraded after 2015 into a naval base and an air base at Khmeimim, near Latakia. Together, these underpinned Russia's only sustained military presence in the Mediterranean and provided its principal air corridor into Africa¹⁴. For Damascus, the arrangement secured a decisive external guarantor during a fourteen-year civil war.

A subsequent agreement in 2017 described Russia's basing rights as valid for 49 years¹⁵. The fall of the Assad government in December 2024 therefore did not merely remove an ally; it put the entire legal and practical basis of Russia's regional military presence in question.

Moscow's declaratory position, however, barely shifted. After Assad's departure, Russian officials avoided any comment on the change of power and instead repeated a consistent set of formulas centered on Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity, and territorial integrity. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov used this language at a meeting with UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen on December 7, 2024¹⁶, and the Russian Foreign Ministry repeated it the following day, calling for an end to violence and a peaceful transition, while confirming that Russian bases remained on high alert but faced no immediate threat¹⁷.

14. TLDR News Global (2025, October 21). *Why Syria is Re-Friending Russia* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/qXTPre3lHQ?si=DMGbPhLeX42ai-re>

15. Alajlouni, L., Dempsey, J., & Vidal Ribe, A. (2025, July 3). Tartus port and Syria's new geo-economic strategy. IISS. <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2025/07/tartus-port-and-syrias-new-geo-economic-strategy/>

16. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2024, December 7). Press release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's meeting with Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for Syria Geir Pedersen. <https://mid.ru/en/maps/sy/1986124/>

17. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2024, December 8). Foreign Ministry statement. https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1986189/

The same emphasis on an inclusive, UN-led process under Security Council Resolution 2254 recurred in Lavrov's calls with Gulf counterparts through December 2024¹⁸, and again in his year-end press conference. There, Lavrov underlined a continuity that had held since Assad's departure: Russia's embassy in Damascus had never closed, he said, and Moscow was already engaging the new authorities through channels that predated the change of power. He framed Syria for Russia not as a relationship being questioned but as a long-standing partner. He pointed to Ahmed al-Sharaa's own description of Russian-Syrian ties as "*long-standing and strategic*," and signaled Russia's hope that economic and investment cooperation would resume once the new government stabilized. Alongside this, he noted that Western powers had been working to sideline Russia's role in Syria's future¹⁹. Rhetorically, then, Russia's position was one of studied continuity, even as its position on the ground was eroding.

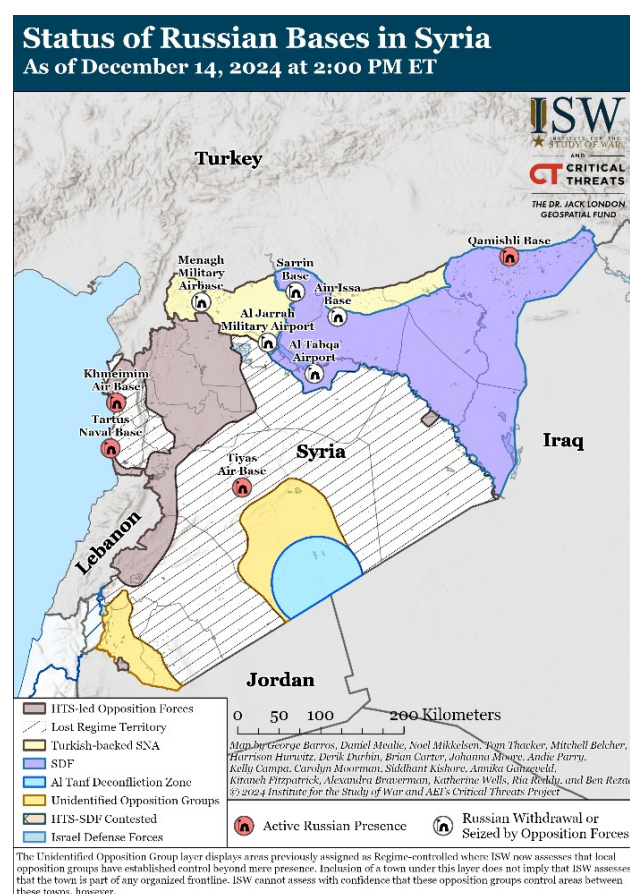
3.1. Military Presence: Retrenchment, Restriction, and a Residual Footprint

Figure 1

Status of Russian Military Bases in Syria Following the Fall of the Assad Regime, December 2024

Source: Institute for the Study of War (ISW) and AEI's Critical Threats Project (CTP), "Status of Russian Bases in Syria," December 14, 2024.

Behind this continuity of language lay a rapid, visible drawdown. As early as December 14, 2024, satellite imagery showed Russian vessels preparing to leave Khmeimim, and equipment being dismantled, with vehicles and materiel massed on the Tartus quayside for possible removal by sea²⁰. That removal did not happen immediately: the cargo vessels *Sparta* and *Sparta II*—both under U.S. sanctions and linked by Ukraine to Russian arms transport—remained off the Syrian coast for several weeks, before finally docking at Tartus on January 21,



18. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2024, December 12). Press release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's telephone conversation with Foreign Minister of the United Arab Emirates Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan. https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1987130/

19. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2024, December 26). Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with Russian and international news media, Moscow. https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1989213/

20. Taheri, M. (2024, December 14). Satellite images reveal Russian military evacuating Syria. *Newsweek*. <https://www.newsweek.com/satellite-images-reveal-russian-military-evacuating-syria-2000952>

2025²¹, around the same time that Syria's interim government canceled Stroytransgaz's 49-year concession over Tartus port, and redirected port revenue to the state. Even with access nominally secured, Russian movements remained contested: on February 11, Syrian forces turned back a Russian convoy carrying missile systems at Tartus, forcing it to retreat to Khmeimim²². Meanwhile the equipment at Tartus was gradually extracted over the following weeks, with the withdrawal largely complete by early March²³.

A pivot point came on February 12, 2025, during a phone call between the two parties. Russia stressed its support for Syrian statehood and Vladimir Putin reaffirmed Moscow's readiness to assist Syria's socio-economic recovery, including through humanitarian aid. Both sides agreed to widen bilateral cooperation²⁴. Relations were then gradually institutionalized. Lavrov held the first ministerial-level meeting with his Syrian counterpart, Asaad al-Shaibani, in July 2025²⁵. Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak visited Damascus in September to discuss energy, humanitarian, and educational cooperation, and proposed reviving the bilateral trade commission²⁶. President Ahmed al-Sharaa travelled to Moscow in October 2025 for the first official visit by Syria's new leadership, followed by a further Kremlin meeting in January 2026 focused on trade, investment, and reconstruction²⁷, ²⁸. A Russian-Syrian Business Council meeting in December 2025 similarly signaled an effort to restore commercial ties, despite unresolved questions over contract recognition and currency transfers²⁹.

Even so, Russia's military footprint in Syria continued to shrink. Flights to Khmeimim resumed only in October 2025 after a months-long pause. In January 2026, Russian forces withdrew from the airfield near Qamishli that they had used since 2019 to monitor Kurdish-held areas in the northeast, redeploying part of the personnel to Khmeimim, and returning the rest to Russia by Il-76 transport aircraft³⁰.

In April 2026, President al-Sharaa stated, during a panel discussion at Chatham House, that of the many military sites and outposts Russia had once used across Syria, only Khmeimim and Tartus remained, and Damascus intended to convert both into training centers for the Syrian army. This intention was formalized on August 9, 2026, when Syria and Russia signed a memorandum of

21. Eardley, N., & Murphy, M (2025, January). Russian ships return to Syrian base ahead of expected withdrawal. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c14nk475nd5o>

22. Altman, H. (2025, February 11). Russian military convoy blocked from entering port of Tartus in Syria. TWZ. <https://www.twz.com/news-features/russian-military-convoy-blocked-from-entering-port-of-tartus-in-syria>

23. Alajlouni, L., Dempsey, J., & Vidal Ribe, A. (2025, July). Tartus port and Syria's new geo-economic strategy. IISS. <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2025/07/tartus-port-and-syrias-new-geo-economic-strategy/>

24. President of Russia (2025, February 12). Telephone conversation with President of the transitional phase of the Syrian Arab Republic Ahmed al-Sharaa. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/76258>

25. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2025, July 31). Press release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's talks with Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates Asaad al-Shaibani. https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/2038907/

26. The Russian Government. (2025, September 9). Alexander Novak's working visit to Syria. (2025, September 9). <http://government.ru/en/news/56169/>

27. President of Russia (2025, October). Russia-Syria talks: Vladimir Putin held talks in the Kremlin with President of Syria Ahmed al-Sharaa, who is in Russia on a working visit. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/78213>

28. President of Russia. (2026, January 28) Russian Syrian talks: Vladimir Putin met with President of the Syrian Arab Republic Ahmed al-Sharaa in the Kremlin. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/79055>

29. Russian Syrian Business Council. (2025, December 25). В Тпп РФ Прошло Заседание Российско-Сирийского Делового Совета. <https://www.russia-syria.ru/index.php?page=show&ex=2&dir=news&lang=5&nt=1&nid=366>

30. Pryhodko, R. (2026). Syria to turn Russian bases into army training centers. MILITARNYI. <https://military.com/en/news/syria-to-turn-russian-bases-into-army-training-centers/>

understanding after 18 months of negotiations. Under the agreement, civilian facilities (including Hmeimim Airport and the commercial berth at Tartus, notably Pier No. 4) will be transferred to Syrian state management and gradually integrated into the country's civilian administration, while the military facilities at both sites will be repurposed as joint training and qualification centers. The transition is to be completed within three months, i.e. by early November 2026³¹.

At time of writing, what remains at the two sites is a reduced contingent, estimated at several hundred to around a thousand personnel, composed mainly of technical staff, security personnel, and a limited air group. This is a fraction of Russia's presence at the height of the Assad era, and is permitted to persist at the sufferance of Syria's transitional authorities, rather than by unqualified treaty right³².

3.2. Economic Leverage: From Concession-Holder to Logistics Partner

As its formal basing rights have weakened, Moscow has leaned more heavily on economic instruments to preserve influence. The loss of Stroytransgaz's Tartus concession to the UAE's DP World, which committed \$800 million to redevelop the port, and the parallel award of Latakia's container terminal to France's CMA CGM under a 30-year, €230 million deal, have confirmed Damascus's intent to diversify its port partners away from Russia³³. Rather than exit the port altogether, however, Russian interests moved to redefine their role within it. In June 2026, the Russian-Syrian Business Council announced a commercial logistics hub at Tartus, to be operated from Pier No. 4 inside what officials describe as a restricted zone of the naval base, with the adjacent berth kept for Russian naval use. The hub, developed by the Syrian firm Rus Line in collaboration with the Russian-Syrian Business Council, and coordinated with Syria's Sovereign Fund, aims to handle initial volumes of approximately 250,000 tons per month of Russian wheat, grain, animal feed, timber, steel, and other goods. The project seeks to establish a regular maritime route between Novorossiysk and Tartus, from where cargo will be distributed to Iraq, Jordan, and Gulf markets³⁴.

This commercial pivot builds on Syria's growing dependence on Russian imports. About 85% of Syria's estimated 2.9 million tons of wheat imports for the 2025–26 season originate from Russia and Russian-occupied Crimea, while Syrian imports of Russian crude oil have increased since Assad's fall, averaging around 60,000 barrels per day in early 2026. Combined with a continued logistics role at Tartus and Russia's permanent seat on the UN Security Council, these economic ties provide Moscow with enduring sources of influence, irrespective of the scale of its future military presence.³⁵

31. Ramadan, T., Makieh, K., Dalatey, F., & Reuters. (2026, August 9). *Syria and Russia reach deal on future of Tartous and Hmeimim bases after 18 months of talks*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-russia-reach-deal-future-tartous-hmeimim-bases-after-18-months-talks-2026-08-09/>

32. Pryhodko, R. (2026). *Syria to turn Russian bases into army training centers*. MILITARNYI. <https://military.com/en/news/syria-to-turn-russian-bases-into-army-training-centers/>

33. Global Banking & Finance Review (2026, July 7) French shipping group CMA CGM signs deal with Syria <https://www.globalbankingandfinance.com/french-shipping-group-cma-cgm-signs-deal-syria/>

34. Middle east Online (2026, Jun 9) Russia moves to entrench Syria influence through logistics hub: The commercial logistics hub is central to Russian efforts to maintain and expand its influence in Syria through economic channels. <https://middle-east-online.com/en/russia-moves-entrench-syria-influence-through-logistics-hub>

35. Asharq Al Awsat (2026, July 10). Russia to Increase Economic Influence in Syria Through Commercial Logistics Hub at Syrian Port. <https://english.aawsat.com/business/5294366-russia-increase-economic-influence-syria-through-commercial-logistics-hub-syrian>

3.3. From Dominant Patron to Transactional Partner

Taken together, these developments describe less a Russian exit from Syria than a change in the terms of Russia's presence. Where Moscow was once the guarantor of the Syrian state, it is now one supplier among several. Damascus now has greater leverage: it controls whether Russian convoys move, whether contracts are honored, and whether Khmeimim and Tartus survive as anything more than symbolic training sites for Russia. Yet the relationship remains mutually useful. The same pressures narrowing Russia's footprint in Syria have accelerated a much older process: the reorientation of Russia's Mediterranean strategy toward Libya, where Moscow has spent the past two years converting an improvised wartime partnership into what increasingly looks like an important hub for its regional power projection.

IV. LIBYA'S GROWING ROLE IN RUSSIA'S MEDITERRANEAN STRATEGY

4.1. Drivers of the Reorientation

Russia's turn toward Libya predates Assad's fall, but the collapse of December 2024 gave it new urgency. Moscow moved quickly to reinforce its positions in eastern Libya in an effort to preserve the logistical network that supports its operations across Africa: a hedging strategy prompted by changes in Syria³⁶. Within days of Assad's departure, a substantial volume of Russian military equipment and Russian personnel began to move from Syria to Libya. Transfers of radar systems and S-300 and S-400 air-defense systems were also reported³⁷.

Russia's pivot to Libya also reflects a broader strategic recalibration. Whereas Moscow's approach in Syria relied heavily on a personalized alliance with the Assad regime, its strategy in Libya emphasizes infrastructure development, long-term partnerships, and a broader regional footprint³⁸. This evolution suggests an effort to apply the lessons of Syria by reducing dependence on a single political partner, and instead embedding Russian influence through a wider network of regional alliances and strategic assets. Nevertheless, this visibility presents risks: Libya is a more exposed operating environment. Moscow faces greater scrutiny from European actors, particularly Italy and the European Union, while also competing with other external powers³⁹.

4.2. Building a Footprint in Eastern Libya

Russian involvement in Libya has evolved in stages. Kremlin-linked private military and security companies first appeared around 2016, carrying out demining work in Libyan National Army-held territory in northeastern Libya. The Wagner Group began to provide direct support to Khalifa

36. Luras, D. (2025, January 11). Russia eyes libya to replace syria as africa launchpad. *The Moscow Times*. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/01/11/russia-eyes-libya-to-replace-syria-as-africa-launchpad-a87573>

37. The Soufan Center (2025). *Geopolitical Competition Escalates in an Unstable Libya*. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2025-june-9/>

38. El Gomati, A. (2025). *Russia's Evolving Strategy in the Mediterranean: Betting on North Africa?* ISPI. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/russias-evolving-strategy-in-the-mediterranean-betting-on-north-africa-224104>

39. Luras, D. (2025, January 11). Russia eyes libya to replace syria as africa launchpad. *The Moscow Times*. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/01/11/russia-eyes-libya-to-replace-syria-as-africa-launchpad-a87573>

Haftar's forces in 2018 and had established itself at several air bases by May 2023⁴⁰. Following the death of Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin in 2023, Russia reorganized Wagner's operations into the Africa Corps, which absorbed much of its personnel and equipment, a formation under the direct control of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU) and the Deputy Defense Minister⁴¹. Personnel numbers rose quickly thereafter: from roughly 1,000-1,500 in April 2024, to about 2,500 by August 2024, with a further influx after Assad's fall⁴².

Chapman et al (2026) identified Africa Corps activity at six Libyan air bases: Al-Khadim, Al-Jufra, Tamanhint, Matan al-Sarra, Al-Qardabiyah, and Brak al-Shati, where satellite imagery through early 2026 showed new hangars, barracks, communications towers, and runway resurfacing, consistent with preparations to host larger aircraft and additional troops. Of particular significance is Matan al-Sarra, a long-neglected desert strip close to the borders with Chad and Sudan (Chapman et al, 2026). The base is significant because Russia began sending Syrian troops loyal to the Assad regime to help rebuild it as early as December 2024. It has been described as a logistical hinge linking Libya to Chad, Niger, and Sudan's war economy—the same route Muammar Qaddafi once used to project Libyan power into the Sahel.

These military ties have been formalized at political level. In May 2025, Khaled Haftar, son of the LNA's commander, signed an agreement in Moscow with Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov to expand military and security cooperation⁴³. The following months saw a public LNA parade of Russian-supplied Pantsir-S1 air-defense systems, BM-30 Smerch rocket launchers, and Tigr armored vehicles, implying a sustained Russian advisory presence rather than a one-off arms sale because of the need to maintain and operate the equipment⁴⁴.

Tobruk has emerged as a second pillar. A February 2025 tripartite arrangement between Haftar, Russia, and Belarus granted the two external partners use of roughly 11.7 square kilometers of port waters and adjacent infrastructure, together with access to the nearby Tobruk Air Base. Russia may be intending to develop the site under Belarusian cover to limit international attention. Russian naval vessels have since been observed unloading towed artillery, armored personnel carriers, and rocket launchers there, and a U.S.-sanctioned Russian cargo ship, *Mys Zhelaniya*, was spotted at the port as recently as January 2026. These developments underscore Tobruk's growing role as a logistical hub for Russia's long-term military posture in Libya and the wider Sahel⁴⁵.

40. Chapman, B., Word, C., Coffey, S., O'Brien, S., & Nguyen, K. (2026, June 3). *Libya: Russia develops air base infrastructure likely to secure military foothold in North Africa and Sahel*. *Tearline*. https://www.tearline.mil/public_page/libya-russia-develops-air-base-infrastructure-likely-to-secure-military-foothold-in-sahel-region

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4.3. Strategic Value: Logistics, Projection, and Leverage

Libya is attractive for Russia not for any single base but because of the network it completes. Regular Il-76 rotations are reported to link former Syrian facilities, eastern Libya, and Sudan into something close to a single operational theatre, giving Moscow an air bridge running from the Mediterranean coast through the Sahara to the Sahel and the Red Sea⁴⁶. Meanwhile, Tobruk offers a warm-water naval alternative at a time when Russia's ambitions in Port Sudan face delays, and its long-term access to Tartus remains unresolved⁴⁷, making eastern Libya, in effect, an insurance policy for Russia's Mediterranean and Red Sea basing needs. Geographically, the payoff is immediate: Russian positions in eastern Libya place Moscow's forces close to southern European airspace and within range of Italian energy infrastructure on the Mediterranean's northern shore. Proximity to migration and smuggling routes, and to the roughly 10% of Europe's crude oil imports that pass through eastern Libyan terminals, provides Moscow with potential sources of leverage in its relations with European states⁴⁸.

None of this makes Libya a straight substitute for Syria. Haftar has cultivated Western ties for decades and is unlikely to sever them entirely. Washington, meanwhile, has actively worked to discourage Haftar from granting Russia permanent installations at Tobruk⁴⁹. What Libya does offer is redundancy: a second, less-centralized node of Mediterranean and African power projection that reduces Russia's exposure to the kind of single point of failure that Assad's collapse exposed, even at the cost of drawing Moscow into a more contested and more visible theatre than Syria.

V. BROADER IMPLICATIONS

Russia's dual-track strategy, maintaining residual, negotiated access to Syria, while securing an expanding military-logistical network in eastern Libya, has major consequences beyond the two countries. It is altering the architecture of Russian power projection across the Mediterranean, shaping Syria's efforts to regain strategic autonomy, and adding another complication to the calculations of regional and international actors. Post-Assad, Syria and Libya now fulfill distinct but increasingly complementary strategic roles.

In Libya, the establishment of a Russian presence at facilities including Al-Jufra, Al-Khadim, and Brak al-Shati, alongside the logistical importance of eastern Libyan ports, gives Moscow access to infrastructure close to the central Mediterranean's maritime routes, southern Europe, and North African energy supplies. The consolidation of longer-term military access there would expand Russia's surveillance, logistical, and air and naval power-projection capabilities in the central Mediterranean, and could grant additional leverage in a region where European security interests intersect with energy supplies, irregular migration, and ongoing instability.

46. El Gomati, A. (2025, December 8). Russia's Evolving Strategy in the Mediterranean: Betting on North Africa? . *ISPI*. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/russias-evolving-strategy-in-the-mediterranean-betting-on-north-africa-224104>

47. Chapman, B., Word, C., Coffey, S., O'Brien, S., & Nguyen, K. (2026, June 3). *Libya: Russia develops air base infrastructure likely to secure military foothold in North Africa and Sahel*. Tearline. https://www.tearline.mil/public_page/libya-russia-develops-air-base-infrastructure-likely-to-secure-military-foothold-in-sahel-region

48. El Gomati, A. (2025, December 8). Russia's Evolving Strategy in the Mediterranean: Betting on North Africa? . *ISPI*. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/russias-evolving-strategy-in-the-mediterranean-betting-on-north-africa-224104>

49. Didier Lauras . (2025, janvier 11). Russia eyes libya to replace syria as africa launchpad. The Moscow Times. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/01/11/russia-eyes-libya-to-replace-syria-as-africa-launchpad-a87573>

Russia's strategic interest in Libya, nonetheless, is not limited solely to its proximity to Europe. Libya links the Mediterranean theater with Russia's widening footprint in Africa. Eastern and southern Libya can provide a degree of logistical depth to Africa Corps operations, and facilitate troop and materiel movements to and from the Sahel and elsewhere in Africa. This gives Russia's presence in Libya a function not easily replicated in Syria: serving simultaneously as a Mediterranean and an African platform. Russia's residual access to Syria, in contrast, will continue to provide influence in the eastern Mediterranean and preserve military and political ties forged during the past decade. Combined, the two theaters may serve the Kremlin as a more broadly dispersed strategic platform, reducing reliance on any single host state. This is not equivalent to restoring the kind of strategic freedom Russia once possessed in Assad-era Syria, but it could provide greater adaptability to political fluidity across the wider Mediterranean.

The consequences of this redistribution will be challenging for NATO and the EU, which are already struggling with a fractured southern security environment. The Russian strategic challenge has in effect moved west and closer to NATO's southern flank, without entirely diminishing the smaller Russian presence in the eastern Mediterranean. Southern European states, and especially Italy, will be keenly aware of such developments in light of their proximity to Libya, and their concerns with Mediterranean migration and North African energy supplies. The challenge for Europe and the U.S., therefore, is not merely the establishment of individual Russian military positions, but their potential integration into a coherent system of Russian logistical support that extends from the eastern Mediterranean and Libya, to the Sahel and Africa more broadly.

The strategic ramifications of these changes are complex for Syria as well, centering on questions of sovereignty and strategic autonomy. The imposition on Moscow of a renegotiation of the conditions of its military presence suggests that the transitional authorities intend to set the parameters for the relationship, not merely to inherit them from the Assad regime. The dismantling of Russia's unchallenged presence at Khmeimim and Tartus, by turning them into joint facilities and restoring Syrian sovereignty over the associated civilian structures, would represent a tangible break from the era of preferential access that Russia enjoyed, while reinforcing Damascus's broader narrative of a new era of post-Assad foreign partnerships defined on Syrian terms.

However, this increased sovereign control will likely have limits. Russia will remain important as a provider of food, energy, military equipment, and training to Syria, and will continue to exercise diplomatic influence through its permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Moreover, Syria's deepening relationships with Türkiye, Gulf states, European nations, and the U.S. will provide Damascus with alternative interlocutors that were largely absent during Assad's final years. Syria's strategic autonomy will depend on whether it manages to sustain this diversification without granting any single partner disproportionate leverage. This scenario presents the possibility of strengthening Syrian bargaining power by transforming Russia from an indispensable partner into one among many, while simultaneously sustaining Moscow's continued engagement.

The redistribution of Russian leverage will also have complex consequences for other regional players. Türkiye may face the most obvious challenge. Ankara is one of the most influential foreign actors in post-Assad Syria, and concurrently supports the authorities in western Libya that stand apart from Khalifa Haftar's eastern sphere of authority. Russia and Türkiye will be forced to navigate complex relations in two different arenas where their interests sometimes align and at other times conflict. While this offers potential tactical openings for cooperation, it could also reduce the autonomy of these actors in the long term.

The implications for the U.S. and Europe demonstrate the interconnectedness of, and the difficulty of treating, Russian actions in Syria, Libya, and Africa as separate policy spheres. Constraints in one theater may simply cause Moscow to adapt and reorient its strategy elsewhere. Shrinking Russia's freedom of maneuver in post-Assad Syria has not automatically meant that its broader Mediterranean presence is diminishing. Rather, it suggests that Libya may assume some of these strategic functions for Russia, potentially across even broader stretches of the Mediterranean.

Ultimately, Russia's post-Assad adaptation is neither a restoration of its prior role in Syria nor a complete strategic retreat. What is unfolding in the wider Mediterranean is a more agile and diversified Russian approach. The long-term effectiveness of its revised model remains to be seen and will depend on Moscow's ability to translate access into sustained and meaningful political and military influence. Nonetheless, it serves as a reminder that understanding Russian strategy in the Mediterranean now requires looking at the network connecting Syria and Libya with the full extent of Russia's engagement across Africa.

VI. RISKS, CHALLENGES, AND FUTURE SCENARIOS

Russia's adapted posture across Syria and Libya gives it geographical flexibility but also introduces new vulnerabilities. Russia's emerging Mediterranean network relies on negotiated access, relationships with actors pursuing their own goals, and dynamic political contexts with ongoing risks of turbulence. Its persistence thus depends on Russia's willingness to maintain its engagement, and also on Moscow's ability to preserve sufficient local acquiescence over time, while navigating counter-pressures from both within and outside the region.

For Syria, the task is to balance the benefits of continued Russian assistance against the objective of regaining strategic autonomy. Russian wheat, oil and gas, military equipment, technical support, and transport infrastructure and logistics, remain important to a state with significant reconstruction and humanitarian needs. Maintaining these links, however, will have consequences for Syrian autonomy: heavy reliance could again give Russia leverage over Syrian foreign policy and strategic decision-making. The Syrian state's success in diversifying its external partnerships is thus a crucial development in safeguarding its own interests. Improved economic and political ties with Gulf states, Türkiye, the U.S., and the EU would reduce Syrian dependence on Russia and give Syria more leverage when negotiating military and commercial agreements.

A second, connected challenge in sustaining external partnerships is internal instability within Syria. The persistence of autonomous armed groups, the simmering conflict in Sweida, minority grievances, and residual extremist networks have the potential to undermine state-consolidation efforts, and could affect the political calculus on continued access for foreign troops. Israeli military activity provides a further variable; an escalation of conflict in southern Syria, for example, would increase pressure on Damascus to renegotiate the role of external security partners.

Similar constraints for Moscow lie in its other relationships, and in the resources it must deploy to maintain a widely dispersed military and logistical presence across the Mediterranean and parts of Africa. Russia's continued war in Ukraine may place heightened demand on these resources, although relatively small access and logistical footprints in Syria and elsewhere could somewhat mitigate this pressure. More critically, Russia's arrangements continue to rely on access provided by local partners that do not necessarily want to remain permanently dependent on Russia. Syria's leadership has already demonstrated its willingness to renegotiate the terms of Russia's presence.

Khalifa Haftar and his military network also cultivate important relationships with the EU, the U.S., and Middle Eastern states, which are key financiers and political actors with their own motivations. A more overt and sustained Russian military presence will also continue to incur opposition from Ankara, Western European governments, NATO, and the U.S.

Against this backdrop, three broad scenarios for the next two to three years can be outlined.

Consolidation. Russia maintains its reduced military footprint in Syria while incrementally expanding its infrastructure and logistical capacity in eastern Libya, to cement the use of the area as a secure node connecting Russian interests to operations in the Mediterranean and parts of Africa. Economic ties continue but do not recreate Syria's dependency on Russia under Assad. Russia thus solidifies a relatively secure, distributed regional presence at a reasonable financial and political cost.

Managed Friction. Moscow maintains access in both Syria and Libya but faces constant pressures and constraints. Syria tests the limits of Russian military activities and commercial arrangements from time to time. In Libya, competing interests and external pressure further limit Russian ambitions. Russia's involvement becomes more transactional and conditional as the Syrian government seeks other foreign partnerships, and Libya's regional sponsors continue to pressure Haftar and his supporters to move away from excessive dependence on Moscow. In this scenario, Russia remains an actor in the region but at a greater financial and diplomatic cost, and with continuing risks of escalation and renegotiation.

Strategic Marginalization. More effective diversification of Syrian foreign policy and greater engagement by Western and regional actors in Syria and Libya, coupled with changes in political calculations in eastern Libya, create conditions in which Russia faces substantial limitations on its access. Syrian opposition to continued Russian military activities increases over time, while Libyan partners limit Russian access to their territory as they seek greater engagement with Western and regional actors instead. Russia can maintain diplomatic ties, but its ability to exert sustained military influence in the Mediterranean and parts of Africa from Syrian and Libyan territory is significantly undermined.

A plausible outcome is one that blends consolidation with managed friction. While Russia has demonstrated adaptability and resourcefulness in overcoming setbacks in changing political contexts, its post-Assad position relies on the more unstable parameters of negotiated access to other states' territories, and on their respective interests and political contexts. The central question is thus not whether Moscow can preserve some form of Mediterranean foothold, but whether it can translate negotiated access across different geographical theaters into a durable strategic network, without reproducing the asymmetries and vulnerabilities that have necessitated adaptation.

For Syrian authorities, meanwhile, the recommendation would be to maintain strategic autonomy through diversification and legal transparency. For Damascus, reliance on a single external patron, such as Russia, could weaken attempts to strengthen its national sovereignty and economic position. Syria should take transparent steps to regulate and constrain both the access and activities of foreign military and security personnel in the country, and should pursue every avenue to diversify its sources of food, energy, investment, equipment, and medical assistance, as transparently as possible. Broader political inclusion and a national consensus that includes all segments of Syrian society should be policy priorities, so there is no window for external entities to exploit domestic fragility in pursuit of their own interests.

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The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank aiming to contribute to the improvement of economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and the rest of Africa as integral parts of the global South.

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All opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors.

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