# The Iskenderun Administrative District of Syria in the Light of a 1947 CIA Secret Report

***Karakachian Vahakn V.***
*Researcher,*
*Former Editor in Chief, Horizon Weekly of Canada*
*Former Editor in Chief, Hairenik Weekly of USA (Yerevan, RA)*
https://orcid.org/0009-0003-3079-7241
vahaknk@yahoo.com

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## Սիրիայի Իսկէնտէրուն վարչատարածքի խնդիրը Կենտրոնական հետախուզական խմբի 1947 թ. գաղտնի զեկույցի լույսի ներքո

***Գարագաշեան Վահագն Վ.***
*Հետազոտող*
*Կանադայի «Հորիզոն» շաբաթաթերթի նախկին խմբագիր*
*ԱՄՆ «Հայրենիք» շաբաթաթերթի նախկին խմբագիր (Երևան, ՀՀ)*

**Ամփոփագիր.** Հոդվածը ուսումնասիրում է Երկրորդ Աշխարհամարտի նախորյակին, Ֆրանսիայի հովանավորության ներքո գտնվող Սիրիայի Իսկենդերունի վարչատարածքի (Թուրքիայի Հաթայ նահանգ) ճակատագիրը: Ֆրանսիան, ցանկանալով Թուրքիային պահել Նացիստական Գերմանիայի դաշնակիցը դառնալուց, զիջումների գնաց: Այդ զարգացումների ժամանակահատուած Ամերիկայի Միացյալ Նահանգների Կենտրոնական հետախուզական վարչությունը հրապարակում է գաղտնի տեղեկագիր Իսկենդերունի վարչատարածքի՝ Թուրքիային հանձնումից հետո ստեղծված իրավիճակի մասին: Հոդվածը միաժամանակ ներկայացնում է Հայաստանի Առաջին Հանրապետության պաշտպանության նախարար Ռուբեն Տեր-Մինասյանի քաղաքական հայացքներն ու վերլուծությունները Իսկենդերունի վարչատարածքի աշխարհաքաղաքական կարևորության մասին: Հոդվածի ծալքերում ներկայացվում է նաև Ալեքսանդրեթի Ծոցի ռազմավարական նշանակությունը 21-րդ դարում՝ հատկապես Սիրիայի քաղաքացիական պատերազմի ընթացքում Հաթայի նահանգի ազդու դերակատարությունը, երբ Անկարայի կողմից Հաթայը օգտագործվեց Սիրիայի հակակառավարական ահաբեկչական խմբավորումներին սպառազինելու նպատակով: Կենտրոնական հետախուզական վարչության և Ռուբեն Տեր-Մինասյանի վերլուծությունները ապացույցն են այն փաստին, որ Իսկենդերունի վարչատարածքի բռնակցումը Թուրքիայի կողմից հաշվարկված քաղաքական ծրագիր էր, որպեսզի Իսկենդերունի ծոցը վերածվի դեպի Մերձավոր Արեւելք և Արեւելյան Միջերկրական Ծով Թուրքիայի հարավարևելյան սահմանների անվտանգության դարպաս:
**Հանգուցաբառեր և բառակապակցություններ՝** ԱՄՆ, Կենտրոնական հետախուզական վարչություն, Իսկենդերունի վարչատարածք, Թուրքիայի Հանրապետություն, Սիրիա, արտաքին քաղաքականություն, ռազմավարություն

## Проблема административного района Искендерун в Сирии в свете секретного доклада Центральной разведывательной группы 1947 года

***Каракашян Ваакн В.***
*Исследователь,*
*Бывший главный редактор канадского еженедельника «Horizon»,*
*Бывший главный редактор американского еженедельника «Hairenik» (Ереван, РА)*

**Аннотация.** В статье рассматривается судьба Александреттского санджака (ныне провинция Хатай Турецкой Республики), находившегося в то время под французским мандатом, накануне Второй мировой войны. Стремясь не допустить превращения Турции в союзника нацистской Германии, Франция пошла на ряд уступок. В этот период Центральное разведывательное управление США рассекретило документ, содержащий сведения о ситуации, сложившейся после передачи Александреттского санджака Турции. Одновременно в статье освещаются политические взгляды и аналитические оценки Рубена Тер-Минасяна, министра обороны Первой Республики Армения, относительно геополитического значения административного района Искендеруна. Особое внимание уделяется также стратегическому значению Александреттского залива в XXI веке, в частности

роли провинции Хатай в период гражданской войны в Сирии, когда Анкара использовала данный регион для вооружения антиправительственных террористических группировок в Сирии. Анализ материалов Центрального разведывательного управления и взглядов Рубена Тер-Минасяна свидетельствует о том, что аннексия Искендерунского региона Турцией представляла собой целенаправленную политическую схему, призванную превратить Искендерунский залив в своеобразные «ворота безопасности», простирающиеся от юго-восточных границ Турции в направлении Ближнего Востока и Восточного Средиземноморья.

**Ключевые слова и словосочетания:** Центральное разведывательное управление США, Французская Республика, Турецкая Республика, Сирия, Александреттский санджак, геополитика, внешняя политика, стратегия

**Introduction**

In 1939, through a politically calculated Franco-Turkish arrangement, the administrative district of Iskenderun (the Sanjak of Alexandretta), formerly part of Syria, was annexed to the Republic of Turkey.

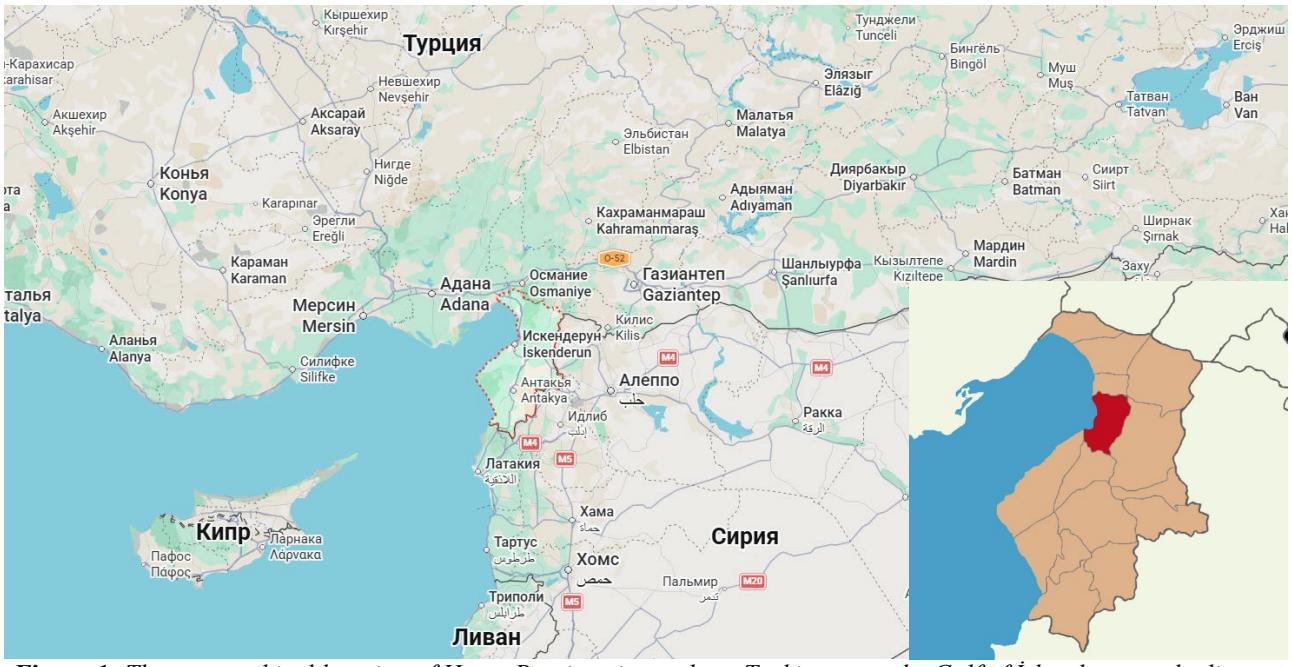



**Figure 1.** *The geographical location of Hatay Province in southern Türkiye, near the Gulf of İskenderun and adjacent to the Syrian border.*

From the eleventh to the fourteenth century, the territory of Iskenderun formed part of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia. As a result, Armenian settlements persisted there into the twentieth century, the largest of which was Musa Dagh.

Following the First World War, under the French Mandate administration, Turks constituted a numerical minority within the population of the Iskenderun district. Through the mediation of the League of Nations, the district was granted autonomous status in 1938 and designated the Autonomous State of Hatay (Hatay Devleti).

In the elections to the legislative assembly of the autonomous state, Turkish candidates secured 22 seats, Alawites 9, Armenians 5, Sunni Arabs 2, and Greek Orthodox Christians 2. Through Franco-Turkish political maneuvering, the Turkish population – constituting only 39 percent of the district's total population – obtained 55 percent of the seats in the legislature. A popular referendum held in 1939, organized in the wake of these developments, was likewise marked by electoral manipulation and resulted in the district's definitive annexation to Turkey under the new name of Hatay.

On the eve of the Second World War, amid an increasingly polarized international arena, the Iskenderun district became a casualty of Anglo-French rivalry with Germany and Italy for dominance in the Mediterranean. According to political analysts, the French cession of Iskenderun to Turkey functioned as a guarantee that Turkey would maintain neutrality and refrain from entering into alliance with Germany.

In the decades following annexation, the district underwent systematic resettlement with Turkish populations.

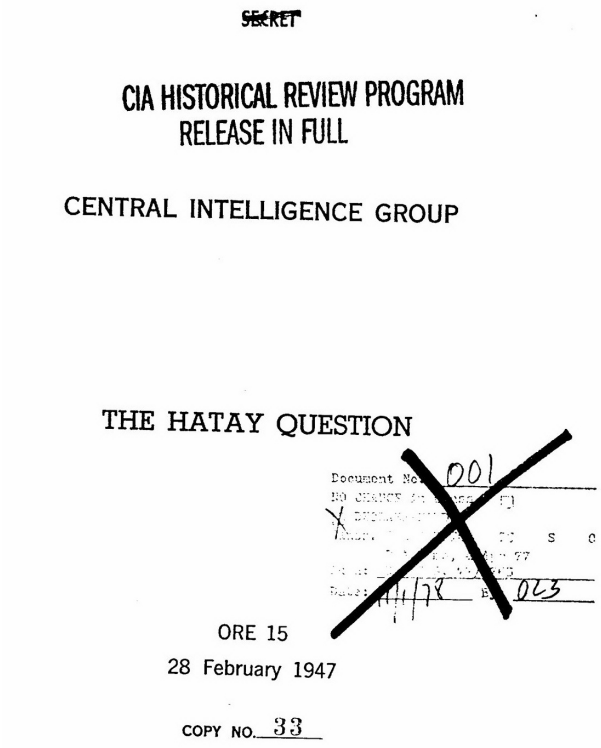
According to French statistical data for 1936, the demographic composition of Iskenderun's population, then numbering approximately 220,000, was as follows [**1**, p. 144]:

| Ethnic/Religious Group | Population | Share |
|---|---|---|
| Arab (Alawite and Sunni) | 83,600 | 38% |
| Turkish | 85,800 | 39% |
| Armenian | 24,200 | 11% |
| Greek, Melkite, and other Christians | 17,600 | 8% |
| Circassian, Kurdish, and Jewish | 8,800 | 4% |
| **Total** | 220,000 | 100% |

The total Armenian population recorded in this dataset is approximately 24,000. By contrast, the principal source examined in this article - a report of the United States Central Intelligence Group dated 28 February 1947, entitled The Hatay Question - places the Armenian population at 13 percent, or approximately 29,000. It should further be noted that the population of Musa Dagh, the most populous Armenian settlement in the district, stood at 4,600 (Houshamadian Mousa Leran).

**The Secret Report of the Central Intelligence Group**

The report is dated 28 February 1947 and is identified as a secret report of the Central Intelligence Group. The U.S. national security organization in question was renamed the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) six months later.


SECRET

CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM
RELEASE IN FULL

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE GROUP

THE HATAY QUESTION

ORE 15

28 February 1947

COPY NO. 33

**Figure 2.** *A declassified 1947 U.S. intelligence report concerning the Hatay Question* (Central Intelligence Group, ORE 15)

The report opens by stating that, according to circulating rumors, Syria was preparing to raise the Hatay question before the United Nations Security Council or the International Court of Justice. The Secretary-General of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for his part, expected that, should such a situation arise, Washington, as Ankara's ally, would not vote in favor of Syria at a meeting of the UN Security Council. The Secretary-General added that Turkey was prepared to make certain concessions, but would never relinquish its claim to Hatay's territorial integrity [**2**].

The report notes that both Damascus and Ankara regarded Iskenderun as important from economic and strategic perspectives. For Syria, the district constituted its most important northern outlet, and there was no other fully operational port on the Syrian coast comparable to Iskenderun. For Turkey, Iskenderun represented a defensive barrier protecting its southern maritime frontier, and its cession could establish a precedent that might subsequently encourage the Soviet Union to advance territorial claims concerning certain areas of Turkey's northeast.

With regard to the Franco-Syrian Treaty of 1936, the report states that, in return for the promised independence of Syria and Lebanon, Ankara demanded Iskenderun. The issue was ultimately submitted to the League of Nations. On 29 May 1937, a commission of inquiry appointed by the League published a draft statute and fundamental laws for the district, under which Iskenderun, renamed Hatay, would become an autonomous region whose customs administration would be coordinated with Damascus.

The district's foreign policy would remain under the control of Damascus, while a forty-seat legislature would include Syrians and Turks, as well as representatives of all national minorities. The report notes that all parties initially accepted the agreement; immediately after its signing, however, the Turkish side made every effort to secure a majority of the seats in the legislature and to have Hatay proclaimed a republic in 1938. The following year, the district was incorporated into the Turkish Republic despite the objections of the League of Nations [**2**].

The report emphasizes that the French were tacitly inclined to transfer the territory entirely to Ankara to secure a “friendly” Turkey in the eastern

Mediterranean. It further confirms that, although the non-Turkish population of Hatay was numerically larger, Turkish manipulation, combined with the French authorities' deliberate refusal to acknowledge Turkish schemes and electoral irregularities, enabled the Turks to secure a majority of seats in the legislature. The autonomous administration of Hatay lasted less than a year. In 1939, the French considered their obligations fulfilled and withdrew from the district; on 23 July of the same year, the territory was annexed to Turkey without the consent of the League of Nations [**3**, p. 5].

The report provides demographic statistics for the population of the Sanjak based on official French statistics from 1936: 45 percent Arab (Alawite, Sunni, and Christian Arab) - 99,000; 39 percent Turkish - 85,000; 13 percent Armenian - 26,000; and 3 percent Circassian, Kurdish, Jewish, and other - 7,000 [**3**, p. 5].

The report notes that, since 1939, a considerable number of Arabs and Armenians had left Hatay. The report also rejects as unfounded the frequent Turkish assertions that the district had long been inhabited predominantly by Turks.

For the Turkish high command, the security of the Taurus Mountain range bordering the southern edge of the Anatolian plateau, and of Turkey's entire Mediterranean coastline, depended upon the Gulf of Iskenderun.

According to the report, the Turks are inclined to the view that an independent Syria is neither sufficiently strong nor sufficiently reliable to guarantee and maintain security in the region, whereas France had succeeded in guaranteeing regional security, at least in 1921. At the same time, Turkey is regarded as an important factor in maintaining peace and stability in the Middle East. Moreover, the Turks believe that satisfying Syrian claims to Hatay could set a disastrous precedent and provide the Soviets with an opportunity to reinforce their own claims concerning the annexation, on behalf of the Georgian and Armenian Soviet Socialist Republics, of large and strategically significant territories situated in northeastern Turkey [**3**, p. 7].

The report's concluding section, entitled “Probable Developments,” states that, in order to render the port of Iskenderun accessible to Damascus, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs had informally signaled its willingness to negotiate with Syria - not merely over minor border adjustments, but over the transfer of port facilities at Iskenderun as well. Such concessions, the report suggests, might be extended to include special customs and transit privileges, the use of warehouse facilities, exemption from port charges, and other measures designed to remove, insofar as possible, the obstacles attending the commercial use of the port by a foreign state [**3**, p. 8].

According to the report, the Turks tended to believe that an independent Syria was neither sufficiently strong nor sufficiently reliable to guarantee and maintain regional security, whereas France - at least as of 1921 - had succeeded in doing so. At the same time, Turkey itself was regarded as an important factor for peace and stability in the Middle East. Moreover, the Turks believed that acceding to Syrian claims over Hatay risked establishing a disastrous precedent, one that might furnish the Soviet Union with grounds to reinforce its own claims to extensive and strategically significant territories in northeastern Turkey, adjoining the Georgian and Armenian Soviet Socialist Republics.

In their analysis, the report's authors propose that a viable compromise might entail Turkey's cession to Syria of the territory on the left bank of the Orontes (Asi) River within the Iskenderun district - the area in which the city of Antioch is situated. This territory encompassed Antakya (Antioch), seat of the Greek Orthodox patriarchate, whose adherents were concentrated principally in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine [**3**, p. 8].

Given the prevailing state of Syrian public opinion regarding questions of sovereignty, it would prove extremely difficult for the Syrian government to enter into negotiations with Turkey on any basis that might, even implicitly, be construed as recognition of Turkish rights. Two conditions, the report suggests, would first need to be met: local efforts to inflame nationalist sentiment would have to subside, and Soviet or other foreign agents would have to refrain from attempts to exacerbate the issue [**3**, p. 8].

In its closing lines, the report expresses the hope that, under calmer circumstances, representatives of the two countries might, through negotiation, arrive at a new political formula - one that would contribute substantially both to Syria's prosperity and to political stability in the Middle East.

It is also necessary to highlight a declassified document in Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947, The Near East and Africa, Volume V, whose diplomatic content corresponds to that of the CIA report discussed above. The Foreign Relations of the United States series is published by the Office of the Historian of the U.S. Department of State and presents official, documentary, and declassified records concerning major decisions and significant diplomatic activity in U.S. foreign policy.

Page 660 of the fifth volume of Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947, The Near East

and Africa contain a document entitled “Statement by the United States and United Kingdom Groups.” Classified Top Secret, the document addresses the Alexandretta question and the reaction of the Soviet Union. The British group records that, under pressure from nationalists, the Syrian government was likely to submit the Alexandretta question to the United Nations General Assembly. The British considered such a step undesirable, on the grounds that the Soviet government might invoke the Alexandretta question as a precedent for advancing territorial claims against Turkey. The U.S. group concurred with the British assessment, stating that “for strategic reasons, it would undoubtedly be preferable for Alexandretta to remain in Turkish hands.” [**10**, p. 660]

**Ruben Ter-Minassian's Assessment of the Strategic Importance of the Sanjak of Alexandretta**

In 1948, a major work of Armenian strategic thought, “Armenia on the Land Routes” [Hayastan mich-tsamakayin oughineru vra], by Ruben Ter-Minassian, Minister of Defense of the First Republic of Armenia, was published in Beirut. The work presents geopolitical developments and politico-military analyses in the aftermath of the Second World War. In 2024, the volume Armenia and the Geopolitical Situation in the Region was published in Yerevan, edited by historian Khachatur Stepanyan. The volume includes one of Ter-Minassian's previously unpublished studies, “Cilicia, Amanus, and Antioch as a Junction of International Routes,” which deals extensively with the Alexandretta Sanjak question and was most probably written between 1948 and 1951.

Ter-Minassian's analysis in “Cilicia, Amanus, and Antioch as a Junction of International Routes” bears directly on the 1947 Hatay report produced by the U.S. Central Intelligence Group, insofar as it sheds light on developments subsequent to that report.

Under the Franco-Turkish agreement concluded on 23 June 1939 and signed in Paris - entitled “Agreement Concerning the Final Settlement of Territorial Questions between France and Turkey” - the Sanjak of Alexandretta was transferred to Turkish authority. Under this agreement, France, in violation of its League of Nations mandate, ceded approximately 4,700 square kilometers of territory to Turkey. In return, France secured Turkey's commitment not to conclude a military alliance with Nazi Germany and not to interfere with French interests in the Middle East.

Writing in the Boston-published journal Hairenik, Ter-Minassian closely analyzed these developments in world history, with particular attention to the geopolitical dynamics on the eve of the Second World War, the expansionist policy of Kemalist Turkey, and the sacrifice of the Armenian political factor by the Western powers.

The Turkish annexation of the Sanjak of Alexandretta, and the subsequent depopulation of its Armenian inhabitants, constitute one of the central subjects of Ter-Minassian's analysis. He argues explicitly that, through the acquisition of Alexandretta, Turkey strengthened its position on the eastern Mediterranean coast and brought the whole of northern Syria under its control, while the depopulation of the Armenian-inhabited territory immediately south of Cilicia represented, in his view, a continuation of Turkey's politico-military policy of annihilation and forced displacement directed against the Armenians of Western Armenia and Cilicia.

In the upheavals of the second decade of the twentieth century, historic Armenian Cilicia - caught in a series of decisive and transformative events - was depopulated, and only the Armenians of the Sanjak of Alexandretta remained, under the protection of the French Mandate administration.

According to Ter-Minassian, the Amanus Mountain range, the southeastern gateway to Cilicia, constituted the key to the Arab Middle East and a zone of exceptional strategic importance. The Amanus range extends northeastward from the Gulf of Alexandretta to Marash and is approximately 180 kilometers long; its strategic significance remains unchanged today, as modern highways, energy pipelines, and railway networks pass through corridors across the range.

Ter-Minassian held that Turkey's interest in the Sanjak of Alexandretta lay in establishing control over the Arab world as far as Egypt and the Persian Gulf [**7**, p. 498]. Regarding French interests, he argued that France lacked any systematic strategic concept for the Sanjak's future [**7**, p. 494], whereas the Arabs regarded the Antioch–Iskenderun axis as a defensive barrier against Turkish expansionism [**7**, p. 499].

“In conclusion, we may say that Turkey's position and ambitions in the Middle East threaten the peace of this region and create such a nightmare and such chaos that they will make the Balkan chaos seem insignificant. This danger is felt particularly acutely today in Syria, which borders Turkey,” Ter-Minassian writes [**7**, p. 319].

In his geopolitical assessment of the Gulf of Alexandretta, Ter-Minassian maintains that, by relying on the Gulf as a strategic base, Ankara had established an apparently impregnable defensive front that could equally serve as an offensive platform against the Middle East [**7**, p. 313].

Examining Turkey's political trajectory, Ter-Minassian concludes that, with the Amanus range

and the Gulf of Alexandretta serving as its strategic rear, Ankara harbored ambitions to reclaim Aleppo and thereby revive the Ottoman Empire [**7**, p. 315].

**The Strategic Significance of the Gulf of Alexandretta in the Twenty-First Century**

In the Gulf of Alexandretta, immediately adjacent to Hatay, lies the port of Ceyhan in southern Adana Province. Ceyhan is the terminal point of major international oil pipelines. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline transports Azerbaijani crude oil to Ceyhan via Tbilisi, while the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline connects the oil fields of northern Iraq to the Mediterranean. For Turkey, the territory of Alexandretta and the Amanus range constitute crucial protective barriers safeguarding the security of the Ceyhan terminal, a major international energy-transit hub.

The strategic importance of the Gulf of Alexandretta is explicitly noted in Defense Turkey, a journal affiliated with the Turkish Armed Forces, which observes that the commissioning of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, carrying Caspian oil to world markets via the eastern Mediterranean, significantly increased the strategic importance of the Gulf of Iskenderun [**9**, p. 14].

Following its annexation by Turkey and until the fall of the Assad regime in 2024, the Iskenderun district continued to appear within Syria's state borders on Syrian educational maps, while politically the Iskenderun question was periodically employed by the Syrian authorities as a bargaining instrument - particularly during the period when the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) operated in Syria and Lebanon under Damascus's protection.

In 1998, under Turkish military pressure, Syria expelled PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan from its territory under the terms of the Adana Agreement; he was subsequently captured by Turkish intelligence in Kenya in February 1999.

A period of political rapprochement between the two countries began in 2003, when they concluded important trade agreements and signed a draft agreement for the ambitious Turkey-Syria Friendship Dam project on the Orontes River, which flows through the Hatay region. During this period, Bashar al-Assad signaled clearly to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that, even if the border question remained formally unresolved, the Iskenderun issue was no longer a priority for Damascus. In 2009 and 2010, the two countries even conducted joint military exercises.

The Syrian war of 2011 overturned these calculations, and the political rapprochement between Syria and Turkey that had prevailed from 2003 to 2011 came to an end as Turkey adopted a sharply confrontational stance toward the Syrian authorities.

On 21 March 2014, militants of the extremist Islamist groups al-Nusra Front, Sham al-Islam, and Ansar al-Sham - reportedly supported by Ankara - launched an attack on Kessab from Hatay and captured the town with artillery support from the Turkish army. Throughout the Syrian war, Hatay served as a logistical corridor through which Ankara armed anti-government militant groups.

Following the outbreak of the Syrian war, the "Popular Front for the Liberation of Iskenderun" operated in the area and, according to unofficial figures, comprised approximately 5,000 fighters supported by Damascus.

Eighty-five years after the annexation of the Sanjak of Alexandretta, an offensive by Syrian opposition forces began in the adjacent Idlib region against Aleppo - an operation that would culminate in the eventual collapse of the Assad regime.

The Hatay cities located near Aleppo and Idlib served as major supply points for Syrian rebel forces. The city of Reyhanli, through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, became a major transit point for weapons destined for rebel-held Idlib; large-scale shipments, including trucks carrying thousands of tons of ammunition and anti-tank weapons, passed through Hatay en route to Idlib [**6**].

The Damascus government invoked the Iskenderun question as a bargaining instrument on 29 November 2021, when the Syrian parliament issued a statement affirming that Iskenderun was an inseparable part of Syrian territory and pledging to "return the stolen lands to their legitimate owners." The same statement characterized the 1939 tripartite agreement among French, British, and Turkish forces as a shameful agreement [**8**].

According to the Armenian-American Orientalist Avedis Sanjian, the Sanjak question would continue to resurface over time, and whenever political disagreements arose between Damascus and Ankara, Damascus would reaffirm its position that the territory of the Sanjak of Alexandretta should be reclaimed [**5**, p. 394].

As of 2026, Turkey exercises de facto military control, administrative influence, and strategic leverage over areas along Syria's northern border. Ankara's strategy is oriented toward securing its southeastern frontier, constraining Kurdish autonomy in Syria, and supporting the Syrian governing administration under its patronage [**4**].

**Conclusion**

The annexation of İskenderun (historically known as Alexandretta) by Turkey in the 20th century was a calculated strategic and political maneuver, which enabled the turkish republic to extend its political influence in the Levant and to utilize the Hatay region as a vital gateway to the Eastern Mediterranean.

In the 21st century Iskenderun has gained more strategic importance, as it controls the Eastern Mediterranean trade routes, serves as a crucial military and naval base for Turkey, and acts as an energy pipeline terminus for domestic pipelines, and at the same time the bay of Iskenderun secures the Kirkuk–Ceyhan and Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipelines in the neighboring Adana Province. Today, the sanjak of Iskenderun or the Hatay province has become the indisputable security frontier of south eastern Turkey.

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