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Pointing to Russian Mercenaries, Turkey's Erdogan Weighs Joining Fight in Libya

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Turkey could counter Russia's private military presence in war-torn Libya with its own troops. **Halit Onur Sandal / AP / TASS**

Turkey could send troops to Libya if its UN-backed government requests help, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Tuesday, pointing to Russian military contractors currently in the war-torn country.

Libya's internationally recognized government said last week it plans to confront Russia over the private mercenaries with a list of up to 800 Russian fighters supporting its strongman opponent. Libya and its key ally Turkey last month signed an expanded security and military cooperation agreement, as well as a deal to drill natural gas in the eastern Mediterranean.

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“Speaking of sending troops, you know there’s a security company from Russia called Wagner” in Libya, Erdogan said Tuesday.

Wagner is a private military company linked to President Vladimir Putin through business magnate Yevgeny Prigozhin. Russia has sent more than 1,000 mercenaries to Libya overall in the past three months, according to The New York Times.

“If Libya requests the same of us, especially since we signed this military security agreement, we can send as much personnel as we can,” Erdogan said.

Libya’s UN-backed government “welcomes ALL international support,” The New York Times quoted its adviser for U.S. affairs, Mohamed Ali Abdullah, as saying in a text message.

Erdogan said the deployment of Turkish troops in Libya would not violate a United Nations arms embargo on Libya.

"In the event of such a call coming, it is Turkey's decision what kind of initiative it will take here. We will not seek the permission of anyone on this," he said.

Erdogan and President Vladimir Putin discussed Libya in a phone call Wednesday, the state-run news agency RIA Novosti quoted the Kremlin as saying. Details of that conversation would be forthcoming, the Kremlin said, without specifying a time.

Putin and Erdogan are scheduled to meet on Jan. 8.

Forces loyal to Libya’s eastern commander Khalifa Haftar launched an offensive this spring to seize Tripoli. The Russian mercenaries’ reported help allowed Haftar’s forces to emerge from the doldrums and seize a key neighborhood over the weekend, The New York Times reported.

“On the Haftar issue, I don’t want it to give birth to a new Syria in relations with Russia,” Bloomberg quoted Erdogan as saying Monday. “I believe Russia will also review its existing stance over Haftar.”

“He is an outlaw, and by that same token, any support he’s given is rendered illegal,” he said in an interview with Turkish state-run television.

Reuters contributed reporting to this article.

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