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# 4,000 Russians Now Fighting in Syrian Insurgency, Says Putin

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**Rwa Faisal / AP**

Thousands of Russians are still fighting for militant forces in Syria, Russian President Vladimir Putin suggested on Thursday.

Speaking to a gathering of naval officers returning from the region, Putin said military intelligence believes as many as 4,000 Russians remain in Syria. A further 5,000 fighters from former Soviet states are also believed to be fighting.

The Russian president gave no sign as to how exactly the figures break down. There are at least nine significant groups still fighting in the conflict, which is now entering its sixth year.

Russia has been involved in a military campaign in support of Syrian President Bashar Assad since September 2015. Russian organization and firepower have been behind increasingly confident operations to retake ground lost to opposition forces.

Putin defended the controversial operations. They had, he said, "dealt a blow to international

terrorism." Russia stood alone in this fight, Putin added, hampered by resistance from "so-called partners" in the West.

Later on Thursday, the president announced that he had plans to strengthen Russia's military further.

The priorities for new investment would be strategic nuclear defense and aerospace defense forces, he said.

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