
RUSSIA SAYS ABOUT 10,000 IS MILITANTS NOW IN AFGHANISTAN

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Russia has estimated there are about 10,000 Islamic State militants in Afghanistan and their number is growing because fighters fleeing Syria and Iraq also are heading to the war-ravaged country.

Russian media on Saturday quoted Zamir Kabulov, Russia's special presidential envoy for Afghanistan, as saying Moscow is particularly worried about an increasing foothold of Daesh militants in northern Afghan provinces bordering Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Daesh is the Arabic acronym for IS.

"Russia was among the first to be sounding the alarms in connection with the emergence of Daesh in Afghanistan.... Daesh has significantly increased its power in the country recently. According to our estimates, the number of militants exceeds 10,000 and continues to grow, particularly due to new fighters arriving from Syria and Iraq," Kabulov told the Sputnik news agency.

The Russian envoy alleged helicopters without identifying insignia are transferring fighters and delivering Western [military] equipment to the Afghan branch of the terrorist group.

He added that Moscow repeatedly has raised the issue with the United Nations and NATO, but has not yet received a clear response from them.

Kabulov says the situation in the Afghan provinces of Jowzjan and Sar-e-Pol are of particular concern because locals also have spotted Algerian and French fighters in the IS ranks. He went on to assert that the terrorist group aims to extend its influence to Russia's southern regions and its partner nations in Central Asia.

"We are regularly asking our NATO partners, who are in fact controlling the airspace over

Afghanistan, about this issue, but we have not heard any reasonable answer yet," Kabulov insisted.

Officials at NATO's Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan, which consists mostly of U.S. troops, blame Moscow for supporting and arming the Taliban, which has been waging a deadly insurgency to topple the U.S.-backed Afghan government.

Afghan officials are dismissing concerns IS loyalists have established a stronghold in the country, and they are playing down the threat posed by the terrorist group. Defense Ministry spokesman Dawlat Waziri told reporters earlier this week sustained security operations backed by U.S. airstrikes have in the past nine months killed about 1,600 Daesh fighters, including senior commanders.

IS began its extremists operations in eastern Afghanistan in early 2015, and at its peak had roughly 3,000 fighters, according to U.S. military estimates.

U.S. officials maintain counter-IS operations being conducted in partnership with local forces have since put persistent pressure on the terrorist group, significantly reducing its territory and eliminating one third of its fighters in the country.

Kaynak/Source: