

Islamists Mull 'State' Language

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Militants waging an Islamist insurgency in the North Caucasus have proposed using either Arabic or a Turkic language as a lingua franca for their affairs.

A decade after Moscow drove separatists from power in Chechnya in the second of two wars, rebels stage near-daily attacks in the North Caucasus, and many want to carve out a separate state from Russia and impose Islamic sharia law.

The insurgents now communicate largely in Russian, also the main language of the dozen or so Islamist web sites they are affiliated with and of their video addresses.

The insurgency leader, Chechen rebel Doku Umarov, suggested earlier this month that a "state" language be formed for the self-styled Caucasus Emirate, a rebel name for Muslim republics including Chechnya and Dagestan.

The proposal came from "the growing discussion among the mujahedin Muslims of the Caucasus Emirate in regard to its state institutions ... and other important aspects of state building," the unofficial Islamist site Kavkazcenter.com reported.

To switch to Arabic would highlight what analysts say is the insurgency's dependence on intellectual and financial patronage from the Middle East and from Islamist groups like al-Qaida.

"It may be that this is part of someone's campaign to foster greater knowledge of Arabic among the Caucasus Emirate mujahedin," terrorism expert Gordon Hahn said in a report to be released Monday by the U.S.-based Monterey Institute for International Studies.

Arabic, the voice of the Quran, was proposed because of its status as "the language of Islam," while a Turkic group language was suggested because of the historical and linguistic links of dozens of languages spoken in the North Caucasus.

Last week a member of the Caucasus Emirate, Abu Zaid, posted a long appeal on Kavkazcenter.com in favor of Arabic, calling it "the international language of jihad."

Although the vast majority of rebels in the North Caucasus are local, the Russian government has said al-Qaida operatives from abroad are fighting alongside them.

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