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Report Links Al-Qaida to Caucasus Insurgency

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Al-Qaida is providing the Islamist insurgency in the North Caucasus with increasing amounts of money and vocal support in their effort to create a state called the Caucasus Emirate stretching from the Black Sea to the Caspian, according to a lengthy report by a prominent Washington think tank.

Underestimating the danger posed by the Caucasus Emirate — which is also the name of the insurgency — "only increases our vulnerability to attack," said author Gordon Hahn, an analyst with the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"Al-Qaida has played an important role in proselytizing jihadism and providing financial, training and personnel support to the mujahedin in Chechnya and the Caucasus," said Hahn, also a senior researcher at the U.S. Monterey Institute for International Studies.

The al-Qaida online magazine Ansar al Mujahideen began appearing in Russian last year, adding to the dozen or so Russian-language sites that either represent or are affiliated with the insurgency.

With increasing regularity, these sites carry statements of support from leading jihadists such as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who inspired al-Qaida in Iraq and is now behind bars in Jordan, Hahn said in the report.

Although the Kremlin has poured billions of dollars into the poverty-wracked region, the violence — especially in Dagestan — has not abated and is even on the rise, causing critics to say Moscow's policy there has failed.

Citing Spanish police who arrested a Moroccan man last year accused of being the webmaster of the al-Qaida magazine, Hahn said: "The web site was already being used to raise money for terrorists in Chechnya as well as Afghanistan."

There has also been a rise in recent years in the number of militants killed by federal security forces in the North Caucasus whom authorities say come directly from al-Qaida.

Though Russian officials have long said the militants depend on financing from the Middle East and al-Qaida, analysts and Western diplomats have disputed this, saying the government did not want to fess up to a homegrown insurgency.

Hahn pointed to the arrest by Czech police in May of eight individuals in Prague suspected of plotting attacks in the North Caucasus as possible proof of ties to al-Qaida. Police said the group, which included a Chechen and Dagestanis, had trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Hahn also emphasized repeated calls by Chechen-born rebel leader Doku Umarov for the Caucasus Emirate to be integrated into global jihad, most recently in February.

The United States has offered a $5 million reward for information leading to the arrest of Umarov, who claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing at Moscow's Domodedovo Airport that killed 37 people in January, as well as the twin metro attacks last year that killed 40.

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