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## Al Qaeda in North Africa seeks Arab Spring jihad

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Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) wants to put its footprint on the Arab Spring now that violence is fueling the uprisings, and in a two-part video is trying to lure new followers for revolt by jihad.

The push comes as the group has sought to expand its operations beyond its Algerian base and desert outposts to countries around Africa, from Nigeria to Libya, after the death of Osama bin Laden and after being sidelined when the Arab revolts erupted earlier this year.

During the mostly peaceful uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, the al Qaeda offshoot kept up sporadic attacks on Algerian security forces in its bid to overthrow the government and install an Islamic state. But the world was looking elsewhere.

Now, with Arab uprisings meeting increasingly violent resistance from autocratic regimes in countries such as Libya and Syria, AQIM wants to be seen as an alternative force.

Seeking a peaceful change of leaders is “like giving aspirin to a cancer patient,” a member of AQIM’s military board, Commander Abu Saeed al-Auresi, says in the lengthy video, according to the SITE Intelligence Group. SITE has made the video available and said it was posted on August 3 on jihadist forums.

AQIM has entered a new phase and is no longer on the defensive, says Mathieu Guidere, an expert in strategic monitoring and al Qaeda specialist.

Despite repeated threats, the group has provided no evidence it is capable of striking across the Mediterranean into Europe. But with bin Laden's death, Guidere said, AQIM promised to lead a military and media offensive in the north, south, east and west of the African continent.

And, he argues, that is happening, with stepped up attacks on soldiers in Algeria — the north — in Mauritania — the west — as well as in Libya — the east — where the movement allegedly sent a “minimal” number of fighters.

To the south, AQIM offered training, men and weapons in January 2010 to a feared Islamic sect in Nigeria called Boko Haram, the local Hausa language for “Western education is sacrilege,” according to an AQIM statement provided by SITE. It was signed by AQIM's leader, Abelmalek Droukdel, using his nom de guerre Abu Musab Abdul Wadud, who evoked “the duty to support Muslims everywhere.”

Boko Haram has significantly raised its profile since the offer with numerous deadly attacks.

There is no sign of a formal AQIM partnership with Boko Haram. British authorities said this month they were investigating a video claiming an unspecified al Qaeda group was holding a Briton and Italian man kidnapped in Nigeria in May.

AQIM stepped up deadly attacks in Algeria in spring and registered more attacks in July than any time this year, according to Guidere. He counts attacks throughout AQIM territory, including in the desert Sahel region south of Algeria — which crosses Mauritania, Niger and Mali, where hostage-taking is a main source of revenue. Four French hostages, captured in September 2010 in Niger, are still being held, possibly in Mali.

For Guidere, AQIM has found a new legitimacy that it had lost at the start of the then-peaceful Arab Spring. Its message is that people can demonstrate in vain against dictators or choose jihad. “For me, this video is a turning point in the (AQIM) propaganda,” Guidere said, because it is looking for a new way to reach the people.

“AQIM is an elitist organisation that believes it is chosen by God,” he said, adding that it always presented its heroes as “exceptional”.