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Fifteen Turkish Protestant congregations and their leaders have been targeted since 27 Aug. by a strident campaign of death threats sent to their Facebook, email, websites and mobile telephones.

The threats followed the style and jargon typically used by the so-called Islamic State (IS), vowing to kill, massacre and behead apostates who the messages accused of having "chosen the path that denies Allah" and "dragged others into believing as you do". As heretics you have increased your numbers with ignorant followers.

"Threats are not anything new for the Protestant community who live in this country and want to raise their children here," the Association of Protestant Christians in Turkey said in a press release on 1 Sept. "But with the recent increase in systematic threats, from this country's west to east and north to south, in different cities, we think that these messages, coming close together and resembling each other, are coming from the same source."

A copy of one message seen by World Watch Monitor displayed the IS flag and called itself "those who go to jihad". It warned: "Perverted infidels, the time that we will strike your necks is soon. May Allah receive the glory and praise."

Most of the messages included a direct quote from the Al-Ahzab chapter of the Quran, which threatens "those who spread false news". "Accursed, they shall be seized wherever found and killed with a horrible slaughter."

A link was also posted for an Arabic video subtitled in Turkish on YouTube entitled, "The religious proofs why apostates should be killed".

One pastor attacked over both email and SMS messages told World Watch Monitor, "They are saying things like they had been waiting for us to return to Islam, and that we are responsible for other Muslims turning to Christ, that our time is up and that Allah will give them our heads".

The majority of Turkish Protestant congregations are former Muslims who have converted to Christianity. In contrast to most Muslim-majority nations, Turkish citizens have the legal right to change their religious identity or leave blank the religion column on their IDs.

Church leaders who received the messages were encouraged by the association to notify the police and public prosecutors in their local area regarding the threats.

Turkey's stance towards IS

Turkey's apparent ambivalence over the past year towards the Islamic State fighting on its borders for control over large sections of neighbouring Syria and Iraq remains under the international spotlight. But in early August, the state-controlled Religious Affairs Directorate issued its first condemnation of the jihadist group as a "terrorist" organisation, officially declaring it "non-Muslim".

Condemning the self-proclaimed IS Caliphate for its "twisted" portrayal of Islam and the Quran, the Turkish government then released a detailed report to inform the public about the group's tactics, slogans, operations and interpretation of Islam through weekly sermons, fatwas (religious edicts) and Quran courses.

Within just 10 days, IS responded with a new video directly threatening Turkey and its president, warning the people of Turkey against "atheists, crusaders and devils who fool them and make them a slave of the crusaders". Vowing to conquer Istanbul soon, the speaker, using the alias Abu Ammar, called on the Turkish people to abandon democracy, secularism and human rights and instead follow Sharia.

Speaking in fluent Turkish on the seven-minute clip, which was distinctly amateur in comparison with the jihadists' usual slick videos, the man was later identified as a 47-year-old Turkish citizen who had taken his wife and children to Syria to join IS in 2014.

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