

**Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con):** It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz). I was particularly pleased to hear his comments about how well he was treated as a Christian growing up in an Arab country, which provide a sorry contrast with what I am about to say about Iran.

I am grateful to Christian Solidarity Worldwide and Elam Ministries for the briefing that they have given me in advance of today's debate. I approach the subject with a degree of humility, conscious that this country has not always got right either the treatment of other faiths or the treatment of other Christian denominations, culminating in the Act of Toleration which we passed in 1689. We have made improvements since that time.

Yesterday in the House a famous footballer was named. In the course of my remarks I shall mention the names of eight Iranian Christians who are currently in prison for no reason other than their faith. Iran wants to persecute Christians in secret, but I believe the world should know and show its concern for what Iran is doing. Christianity has been present in Iran since the second century. We find crosses on coins from around 50 AD, and in the seventh century Iranian missionaries travelled to central Asia, India and China.

Christianity has been protected officially since the 1979 revolution. Article 23 of the Iranian constitution states: "The investigation of individuals' beliefs is forbidden, and no one may be molested or taken to task simply for holding a certain belief." Iran claims that there is religious freedom, but the reality is very different. In spite of that, the Church has grown and there are possibly hundreds of thousands of Iranian Christians today. What we see is a lack of tolerance, oppression and persecution. Open Doors puts Iran at No. 2 on its world watch list of the most severely persecuted countries in which Christians live; North Korea is No. 1.

Christian leaders must report to the Ministry of Information, which demands lists of members of churches. There are regular threats and intimidation. It is illegal to distribute Bibles. The Bible Society was closed down by the Government in 1990. The Iranian authorities have burned Bibles that they have confiscated. In May 2010 they burned hundreds of Bibles and New Testaments intercepted on the Iraqi border. In October last year more than 300 New Testaments were taken and burned by security forces on the Turkish border. Only three months ago, on 7 February 2011, 300 New Testaments were seized by authorities in Salmas, in West Azerbaijan, and publicly burned. Many of us in the House and around the world rightly condemned the attempts by the Florida pastor, Terry Jones, to burn the Koran, but I am not aware of any political leader in Iran—Islamic or otherwise—who has condemned the burning of Bibles. I hope Muslim leaders in the UK will condemn the practice.

Since the mid-1980s Christians have faced arbitrary arrest and imprisonment for their faith. Mehdi Dibaj was in prison for nine years between 1984 and 1993, mostly in solitary confinement, before being sentenced to death for his faith in 1994. Later that year, he was murdered after his release from prison. There has been escalating persecution and an increase in arrests in 2010 and 2011, with 282 known arrests of Christians in 34 cities since June last year.

In prison, Christians are subject to solitary confinement, sleep deprivation, interrogation—particularly about the location of Christian leaders—threats of execution and harm to their family, verbal and physical torture, and lack of medical treatment, and they are called on to renounce their faith. Prisoners are often required to hand over large sums of money and surrender the deeds to their houses to try to get out of prison.

Mostafa Shokrollahi and Khalil Yar-Ali were imprisoned on 15 January 2011. Noorollah Ghabitizadeh was imprisoned in Dezfool on Christmas eve, 2010. Farshid Fathi was arrested on Boxing day 2010. Even though his family raised \$200,000 in bail, he is still in prison. Vahik Abrahamian was imprisoned in Hamadan on 4 September 2010. Masoud Delijani was arrested on 17 March this year. Abraham Firouzi was imprisoned in Robat-Karim on 11 January this year, and his family cannot afford the \$40,000 in bail demanded of them. Yousef Nadarkhani was imprisoned in Rasht on October 2009 and sentenced in November to death by hanging. He is currently awaiting trial before the Supreme Court. If the sentence is upheld, that will be the first execution for apostasy in 20 years, a very worrying development.

Such treatment seems to be officially sanctioned. Ayatollah Khamenei has talked disparagingly about the spread of the network of house churches. On 4 January this year, the Governor of Tehran, Morteza Tamadon, announced the arrest of 39 evangelical Christians whom he described as “deviants”. Apostates can be referred to the revolutionary court.

I request the UK Government to be active in calling for the release of those in prison for their faith, to call for the investigation into how the Iranian Government use the death penalty for apostasy, to denounce the use of intimidation to curtail religious freedom, and to call on Iran to fulfil its constitutional provision for religious freedom and address its rhetoric and constitutional discrimination against religious minorities.