

GOVERNMENT SILENCE IS ANOTHER BETRAYAL OF AFGHANISTAN CHRISTIANS

[Home](#) / [Government silence is another betrayal of Afghanistan Christians](#)

Dr Patrick Sookhdeo, International Director of Barnabas Fund, wrote on 18 August to three MPs requesting that they ask the government to allow Afghan Christians to be resettled in the UK, and explaining why the UK has a unique responsibility to help and support believers from Afghanistan. To date the UK government remains silent on this matter. This is another betrayal of our Christian brothers and sisters. Would you speak up for them, and write to your MP and the Government, perhaps sending them this letter.

The letter is reproduced below.

Dear Sirs,

I trust you will forgive me writing to you together, but I have met you all personally and believe that you will share my concern for Afghan Christians.

The question of resettling Afghan refugees in the UK, following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, is under discussion. It is reported that "religious and other minorities" are amongst the vulnerable groups to be considered for resettlement.

I hope that, within the "religious and other minorities" category, the small community of Afghan Christians can be made a high priority for resettlement. As converts from Islam they are liable to punishment for their apostasy, under the strict sharia rule of the Taliban. The Hanafi school of sharia, which predominates in Afghanistan, specifies death for a sane adult male apostate and imprisonment for a sane adult female apostate.

You are probably familiar with this sharia rule already, but I would like to make you aware of the reason why I believe the UK has a unique responsibility for Afghan Christians.

In 2010 I was in Kandahar as a cultural advisor to ISAF. (In Kandahar it was the UK that led the ISAF military mission.) ISAF had a religious engagement strategy that included neutralising the Taliban's religious credentials. In other words, ISAF wanted to convince the Afghan population that President Karzai was at least as sharia-compliant as the Taliban so that devout Muslims would have no qualms about supporting him. As part of this strategy, ISAF had commissioned two qadis (Islamic religious judges) to write fatwas (Islamic decisions or rulings) on behalf of the Afghan government which would show that the Karzailed government was fully compliant with sharia. The content of the fatwas was disseminated across Afghanistan by radio, TV and print media. The cost of all this was paid for by ISAF.

One of these fatwas was on the subject of Islam's apostasy law and, in line with the apostasy law, the fatwa called for the killing of those who leave Islam. It was therefore in effect a call for the killing of Afghan Christians. I brought this to the attention of four senior officers involved in the commissioning, dissemination and funding of the fatwas: a US major in Special Operations, a British colonel in Intelligence, a British colonel in the Legal Department and finally the British brigadier-general with responsibility for Psychological Operations who had initiated the use of fatwas. (I can give you his name if you wish.) I was tasked by the general to meet the two qadis in their location, which meant travelling under Special Forces protection to their village, many miles outside Kandahar, where I sat with them and discussed the fatwas. They confirmed that they had written the fatwa instructing the killing of apostates. Afterwards I informed the general verbally, explaining again to him the implication of this fatwa for Afghan Christians, and handed him a written report of my visit. He made no comment and laid the file aside. Later I heard from a private military contractor in the USA that the fatwa had indeed been disseminated across Afghanistan.

The circulation of the fatwa must have immeasurably increased the danger faced by Afghan Christians, even in areas ruled by the Afghan government. Now they are under the rule of the Taliban who, we can be sure, will not hesitate to kill Christian men, women and children, on the basis of their statement that they will rule by sharia and their track record of following a very extreme interpretation of sharia. It is important to understand that when the Taliban say they will protect religious minorities, they mean Shia Muslims or Christian-born Christians from historic denominations. They do not mean Christian converts from Islam, who are classified as apostates and traitors to the "Islamic nation", deserving of the death penalty.

Several dozen Afghan Christian families have recently fled to neighbouring countries. The Afghan Christians remaining in hiding in Afghanistan may be 200 to 400 families, but no one can be precise at this moment. We at Barnabas Fund are currently gathering this information.

Can you please press for Afghan Christians to be included in those to be resettled in the UK? In this way our country can offer some kind of recompense for the disastrous fatwa issued in 2010 and restore our honour.

Yours sincerely,

The Very Rev. Car Episcopos Patrick Sookhdeo PhD, DD

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