

# The Marrakesh Declaration avoids hard questions

by

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## Declaration

The [Marrakesh Declaration](#), ignored by the mainstream media, has been acclaimed as a new dawn by some commentators: as promising an era of tolerance and pluralistic harmony in the Muslim-majority regions, where religious minorities have suffered so much for so long. With so much bad news coming from the Muslim world, new voices of hope are bound to receive a warm welcome.

Between 25–27 January, around 300 dignitaries gathered in the Moroccan city of Marrakesh under the auspices of King Mohammed VI of Morocco.

This event represented the culmination of four years of planning, led by Sheikh Abdallah Bin Bayyah of Abu Dhabi, President of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies.

The conference title was ‘The Rights of Religious Minorities in Predominantly Muslim Majority Communities: Legal Framework and a Call to Action’.

As the name suggests, its specific goal was to address the discrimination and persecution experienced by religious minorities living under Islamic majority rule, and to open the way for a new era of inclusion rather than exclusion.

Participants included around 50 non-Muslim observers, including Christians from various streams: Catholics, mainstream Protestants and evangelicals.

The conference culminated with the 750-word Marrakesh Declaration, issued in both English and Arabic.

Its style is accessible, its founding principles are clear and its recommendations are compelling.

The Declaration links itself with the Charter of Medina, an agreement of around 1000 words (in English translation) purportedly reached between Muhammad and the tribes of Medina soon after his arrival to assume leadership of the city in 622 A.D.

The Marrakesh Declaration makes grand claims about the 622 Charter, suggesting that it provided ‘freedom of movement, property ownership, mutual solidarity and defence, as well as principles of justice and equality before the law; and that, [t]he objectives of the Charter of Medina provide a suitable framework for national constitutions in countries with Muslim majorities, and the United Nations Charter and related documents, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights...’

Although the Marrakesh Declaration also makes passing reference to the need to follow the principles of the 2007 ‘Common Word’ call for Christian-Muslim dialogue, its primary point of reference is clearly the 622 Charter.

The Marrakesh Declaration sets six ambitious goals for the Muslim world: a new jurisprudence of ‘citizenship’ that is inclusive of minorities; reform of Muslim educational institutions and materials to eliminate ‘any material that instigates aggression and extremism’; new constitutional contracts that include all citizens; a new movement ‘for the just treatment of religious minorities in Muslim countries’; a resurrected tradition of conviviality in Muslim lands between all faith groups; and the elimination of ‘religious bigotry, vilification and denigration of what people hold sacred’.

## Responses

Although the Conference and its Declaration have received scant attention from the mainstream media, there has been a steady flow of public statements in response.

Outside observers have been especially enthusiastic. Rabbi David Fox Sandmel, Anti-Defamation League Director of Interfaith Affairs, expressing a Jewish perspective, described it as ‘one of the most hopeful initiatives’ in combating religious extremism. He accepts the Declaration’s premise that the 622 Charter of Medina guaranteed ‘autonomy and freedom of religion to the residents of Medina, including, explicitly, its Jewish population.’

Dr Robert Sellers, Chair of the Parliament of the World’s Religions, was unrestrained in his praise for the Marrakesh Declaration, declaring that it ‘is both historic and inspiring’.

He accepts that the Declaration and its ancient prototype, the Charter of Medina, reflect the values of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Yet in his statement, he engages in moral equivalence, stressing that Christians also need to apply the spirit and principles of the Declaration to themselves, implying that non-Muslim majority nations have not sufficiently addressed Islamophobia.

Dr Rick Love, Associate Director of the World Evangelical Alliance Peace and Reconciliation Initiative, who also attended the event, is similarly full of praise for its spirit and purpose but at the same time expresses a note of caution. Stressing that ‘it is too early to determine the actual impact this declaration will have’, Love urges readers to support it in order to enhance the Declaration’s chances of succeeding in its goals.

## The Charter of Medina: relevant or not?

No fair-minded observer could oppose the call of the Marrakesh Declaration for improved interreligious relations and reduction of conflict between the faiths and religious persecution. Nevertheless, in its present form the Marrakesh Declaration poses a number of important questions – as do the glowing responses of most outside observers.

Although the Declaration clearly expresses admiration for the 622 Charter of Medina, nowhere does it cite the Charter; nor indeed, do any of the above-mentioned respondents. So we will cast an eye on that ancient Charter to determine whether it really is consistent with the spirit of United Nations declarations.

The Charter of Medina is recorded in the earliest biography of Muhammad, translated into English by Alfred Guillaume. It begins by identifying two groups whom it covers: on one side ‘the believers and Muslims of Quraysh and Yathrib’ – representing Muhammad’s followers from Mecca and ‘believers’ in Medina– and on the other side ‘those who followed them and joined them and laboured with them’, namely those who were not [yet] believers.

The Charter then specifies that these two groups ‘are one community (*umma*) to the exclusion of all men.’ This short phrase points to a spirit of both inclusivism and exclusivism in the document. It is inclusivist in encompassing participating non-Muslims in the community under Muhammad, and it is exclusivist in rejecting all others.

Further on, the Charter’s spirit of ‘us versus them’ is reinforced by two statements: ‘A believer shall not slay a believer for the sake of an unbeliever, nor shall he aid an unbeliever against a believer. God’s protection is one, the least of them may give protection to a stranger

on their behalf. Believers are friends one to the other to the exclusion of outsiders.’ By this point of the Charter, a clear believer/unbeliever distinction has been established.

Clarification of who qualifies as a ‘believer’ comes in a later instruction in the Charter: ‘If any dispute or controversy likely to cause trouble should arise it must be referred to God and to Muhammad the apostle of God. God accepts what is nearest to piety and goodness in this document.’

A discerning reader cannot miss the key assumption in the Charter of Medina of the ultimate authority of God through his prophet Muhammad and of the supremacy of Islam. ‘Believers’ therefore accept Muhammad as prophet, as well as the primacy of the faith that he founded. Whatever space is made for religious minorities assumes that Islam predominates, and that all matters of significance and dispute shall be resolved within an Islamic framework.

This is clearly inconsistent with the spirit of today’s pluralist thinking as seen in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which does not privilege any religion over others.

## An elephant in the room?

It is naive to accept the positive words of the Marrakesh Declaration without scrutinising the very document which the Declaration declares to be its foundation stone. The brief discussion above indicates that selecting the Charter of Medina as the basis of a twenty-first-century policy on interreligious relations poses many questions.

But one further question is mostly studiously avoided: if in some ways the Charter of Medina does not entirely match the spirit of the Marrakesh Declaration, and the Charter of Medina was drawn up and approved by Muhammad and reflected his own views of Muslim/non-Muslim relations, then how compatible is the prophet of Islam himself with the proposals of the Marrakesh Declaration?

The records of Muhammad’s life, statements and deeds portray him as an enigmatic figure. On the one hand, there are reports that he showed compassion to widows, orphans and even cats. He is quoted as saying: ‘The person who strives on behalf of the widows and poor is like those who strive in the way of Allah and like those who fast in the day and pray at night’ (*Al-Adab Al-Mufrad*, Book 7 Hadith 131).

However, he is also quoted as making statements which do not sit well with the calls of the Marrakesh Declaration regarding interreligious relations. For example, one hadith report has him saying ‘Do not greet the Jews and the Christians before they greet you and when you

meet any one of them on the roads force him to go to the narrowest part of it' (*Sahih Muslim*, Book 26, Hadith 5389).

Indeed, the recorded actions of the Muslim community of Medina under the leadership of Muhammad— and under the rubric of the Charter of Medina – suggest that the Charter was superseded by later events and prophetic guidance.

As observed in a further response to the Declaration by Ayman S. Ibrahim, a Coptic Christian from Egypt now resident in the United States, 'this very Charter of Medina, upon which the Marrakesh Declaration is based, did not actually help religious minorities, particularly Jews, during Muhammad's time. Religious minorities during Muhammad's time were seized, expelled from their homes and often massacred.' This set the pattern for much of later Islamic history.

## Conclusion

The presence of awkward statements in ancient texts creates a need for modern documents designed to improve social and religious harmony. In this context, the Marrakesh Declaration represents a welcome initiative.

However, if the Marrakesh Declaration is to achieve its goals, and in the process to persuade its audience of the relevance of the Charter of Medina, then it needs to be accompanied by a candid and forthright examination of that Charter and of the social and religious mores of the Medinan community led by Muhammad in the 620s.

Furthermore, outside observers who accept the Marrakesh Declaration at face value without asking more searching questions about its foundations are in fact reducing the likelihood that Muslim scholars will undertake the kind of searching critical scrutiny of their ancient sources that is desperately needed and long overdue.

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