



# THE MARRAKESH DECLARATION AND UK POLICY:

Introducing a Muslim Paradigm of  
Religious Freedom





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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This handbook is based on the Marrakech Declaration, which resulted from the collaboration of over 250 faith leaders, government officials and academics under the auspices of His Eminence Shaykh Abdallah Bin Bayyah, to whom we are most indebted for laying the theoretical groundwork and making its achievements possible. We would also like to thank H.E. Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, H.E. Sheikh Al Mahfoudh Bin Bayyah, Zeshan Zafar and Dr. Mohamed Elsanousi, who have since worked to promote the Declaration internationally.

This handbook was produced by the UK Forum for Peace (Registered Charity No. 1186676), of which Zeshan Zafar is Chair. We would like to thank him along with our trustees, for representing the cause of interfaith dialogue and religious freedom within Muslim communities in Britain. We would also like to thank Esmé Partridge for conceptualising and writing the document; Dr Austin Tiffany and Kishan Manocha for their editorial support; and Sonam Mittal for design.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## The Challenge

As Britain's religious landscape changes,<sup>1</sup> the need to cultivate healthy relationships between faith communities is vital. Initiatives which advance Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), as defined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR),<sup>2</sup> are an important step towards this end. However, these initiatives can be met with scepticism among followers of traditional religions who, perceiving the UDHR as a Western secular institution, deem it to be incompatible with their beliefs. As a result, they can be reluctant to engage with FoRB and are subsequently underrepresented in efforts to advance it, with these being perceived as currently dominated by Christian and secular civil society organisations. Since issues of religious freedom and toleration ought to concern all religious communities in Britain today, including numerically smaller or minority communities, there is a need to seek ways of involving them in such a way that addresses their concerns about the human rights framework and works with their beliefs.

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1 Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 29 November 2022, ONS website, statistical bulletin, Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021.

2 The United Nations, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Article 18, December 1948.



## The Solution

A response to this issue in the context of Muslim societies has been offered by the Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace, which in 2016 produced the historic Marrakech Declaration;<sup>3</sup> a document which affirms the legitimacy of minority rights and religious freedom on Islamic grounds, thereby translating these concepts into a meaningful language for Muslims. The document was the fruit of over 250 scholars representing a wide diversity of Muslim communities from 74 countries, giving it theoretical legitimacy for believers of all theological persuasions. Following the success of the Declaration, the Forum launched a further initiative called the Alliance of Virtue,<sup>4</sup> in which representatives of Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities came together to enrich human rights discourse with ideas from their own religious traditions, thereby extending the original approach to other religions.

Emulating the Marrakech Declaration and Alliance of Virtue could prove highly advantageous in the British context, where it may help to overcome the perceived incompatibility between human rights and traditional religions. This policy handbook offers an in-depth overview of the Forum for Peace's strategy, offering a series of recommendations for putting its theory into practice for faith leaders, policymakers, and those working in civil society. These recommendations provide the means for moving beyond a purely secular approach to FoRB and developing an inclusive and comprehensive approach to FoRB enriched by insights and understandings gleaned from the diversity of religious traditions. More information about the Forum can be found on page 17.

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3 The Marrakech Declaration can be downloaded in Arabic and English online at <https://www.marrakeshdeclaration.org/> (Accessed February 2023).

4 For an overview of the Alliance of Virtue programme and publications see <https://www.allianceofvirtues.com/english/Default.asp?L=EN> (Accessed March 2023).

# NAVIGATING RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY: THE CRITICAL ROLE OF FORB IN MODERN BRITAIN

Britain is more diverse than ever. Not only ethnically,<sup>5</sup> but also religiously. In England and Wales, 3.9 million people now identify as Muslim,<sup>6</sup> with Hinduism and other non-Christian beliefs also on the rise. While multi-faith societies pose opportunities for enrichment, they can potentially also give rise to misunderstandings and division. Matters of belief may provoke and amplify social tensions, exerting a powerful influence over the identities and interests of minority communities as demonstrated by the outbreak of violence between Muslim and Hindu groups in Leicester in October 2022.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, religion will play an evermore significant role even in nominally secular countries, and may increasingly come to define societal fault lines.

It is against the backdrop of these profound demographic and socio-cultural changes - and the potential for possible division - that we assert the importance of Freedom of Religion or Belief. As religious diversity becomes a more pronounced feature of British society, it is imperative to affirm the rights of each individual and community to safely hold and express their religious beliefs and practices, including access to their places of worship, in line with Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR):

*“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”<sup>8</sup>*

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5 Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 29 November 2022, ONS website, statistical bulletin, [Ethnic group, England and Wales: Census 2021](#).

6 Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 29 November 2022, ONS website, statistical bulletin, [Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021](#).

7 See BBC News, “Large-scale disorder breaks out in Leicester”, 18 September 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leicestershire-62943952> (Accessed March 2023).

8 The United Nations, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Article 18, December 1948.

We commend former Prime Ministers, consecutive Foreign Secretaries, and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) for their sustained commitment to Article 18 as an inalienable right for everyone without distinction, as was evident in their leadership and facilitation of the 2022 International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief. In light of the above, it is now more crucial than ever to promote civil society led FoRB initiatives through the UK FoRB Forum as well as through other avenues, to ensure that a heightened degree of religious pluralism in Britain will not give rise to division and potentially conflict in the UK or overseas.

However, promoting FoRB on the terms of Article 18 alone has its limits. The UDHR, though in theory representing everybody everywhere, can be perceived by certain religious minorities as a Western secular framework, including its perceived overemphasis on FoRB as a right of individuals at the expense of the collective and communal dimension of religious affiliation, practice, and duties, which is removed from, and thereby irrelevant to, their beliefs and everyday experience. Among those for whom the sources of morality and ethics are within scripture and tradition, it may be seen as an external imposition that does not take into account their particular truth claims and religious experience, resulting in a reluctance to appreciate its efficacy or universality.

This policy handbook offers a response to this problem. Despite various misconceptions and misunderstandings about the nature of FoRB as a human right, the precepts contained within Article 18 and the UDHR in general are not, in fact, at odds with the teachings of traditional religions. Notions of freedom of conscience, tolerance, respect for human dignity, appreciation of the diversity of opinion, non-coercion in matters of religion and belief, and respect for one's neighbour can be found nestled within most of the world's faiths, and often follow centuries of theological discourse.<sup>9</sup> The impression that such ideas are exclusive to Western conceptions of rights is therefore false; as a result, there is a need to draw upon well-established religious teachings and traditions which harmonise with those rights, and foster a model of FoRB which utilises the rich resources of individual religions to promote tolerance and contribute to the overall flourishing of our communities and societies.

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<sup>9</sup> For example, just as Jews and Christians follow the Old Testament command to "love your neighbour as yourself", Muslims follow the Prophet Muhammad's teaching, related by Abu Hamzah Anas bin Malik that "none of you will believe until you love for your brother what you love for yourself" (Hadith of Bukhari & Muslim, which most scholars interpret as referring not to a gendered familial relation but one's "brother (or sister) in humanity"); likewise Hindus are taught "that which is unfavourable to us, do not do that to others." (Padmapuraana, Shrushti 19/357–358).



The Marrakesh Declaration offers a significant Muslim contribution to the discussion of human rights. Agreed upon by over 250 scholars from a range of theological traditions, it shows how FoRB and the protection of minorities can be defended on Islamic scriptural and jurisprudential terms. This approach, furthered by the Alliance of Virtue, serves to complement - not contradict - Article 18's definition of FoRB, by adding a theological dimension for those who may be sceptical of its secular premises. It may also serve to deepen the existing legalistic model, considering not just 'rights' but also 'responsibilities' and 'duties' in a spiritual sense.

The Marrakesh Declaration and the Alliance of Virtue provide the means for enriching FoRB in a way that speaks directly to faith communities and inspires their commitment to its promotion and protection. The former represents the opinions of hundreds of Muslim scholars from all sects and schools, and can therefore be utilised by faith leaders, policymakers, and civil society as an authentic Islamic contribution to FoRB. We hope that other religious communities will in due course offer to do the same for their own communities, drawing on their own scriptures and traditions towards a deepened understanding of FoRB and how faith communities envision and contribute to human flourishing and lasting social peace.<sup>10</sup>



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<sup>10</sup> See The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Faith for Rights Framework”, online at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/faith-for-rights> (Accessed April 2023).

# TOWARDS A FAITH-BASED APPROACH

The Marrakesh Declaration and the Alliance of Virtue can act as a cornerstone when laying the groundwork for a faith-based approach to FoRB. The former is a charter to be used and interpreted in Muslim contexts, while the latter goes on to demonstrate how this can be applied to multi-faith contexts.

## a) The Marrakesh Declaration

In January 2016, more than 250 faith leaders, scholars and government officials made a statement to defend the rights of religious minorities in Muslim-majority countries under the auspices of Shaykh Abdallah bin Bayyah, the world-renowned expert on Islamic jurisprudence and the founder of the Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace.<sup>11</sup> This statement, known as the Marrakesh Declaration, was a ground-breaking initiative to condemn religious persecution on the grounds of traditional Islamic teaching where secular interventions had not been taken seriously. Its strategy was “to take today’s seemingly unsolvable problem of granting full enfranchisement to religious minorities and to locate its solution within the matrix of Islam itself, thus satisfying both secularists as well as those committed to the traditions of the Qur’an and the Sunnah.”<sup>1213</sup>

The Marrakesh Declaration is based on the Prophet Muhammad’s Charter of Medina, which formed the basis of a multi-religious state in the 7th Century and ensured the protection of resident Jewish and Christian minorities. The Marrakesh Declaration adapted this charter, reaffirming the Muslim duty to protect these groups and also other persecuted minorities such as the Yazidis and the Chaldean Catholics of Iraq. Its aim was to respond to the circumstances of the modern-day Middle East and the requirements of international law while remaining faithful to the document originally drawn up by the Prophet Muhammad. Although drafted for a specific context, the Declaration has global applicability.

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11 At which UK dignitaries, including the Prime Minister’s Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief, have previously spoken.

12 “Sunnah” refers to the traditions and practices of the Prophet Muhammad.

13 Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, Foreword to *The Marrakech Declaration On the Rights of Religious Minorities in Muslim-Majority Lands: A Legal Framework and a Call to Action*, Abu Dhabi: Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace, 2022, p.4. Shaykh Hamza Yusuf is the Vice President of the Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace and previously served as Human Rights Advisor for the US Government.



# THE MARRAKESH DECLARATION

On the Rights of Religious Minorities in  
Muslim-Majority Lands

A Legal Framework  
and a Call to Action



إعلان مراكش



*“The 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, are in harmony with the Charter of Medina, including consideration for public order.”<sup>14</sup>*

In recent years, the Marrakesh Declaration has been used as a template for promoting positive integrative citizenship in Muslim as well as non-Muslim societies. It became an impetus for a series of dialogues held at Wilton Park to facilitate “discussion on the development of a new framework for citizens and members of different religious groups to live together as equal citizens, respecting each other’s rights and existence.”<sup>15</sup> This was subsequently chosen as the theme for the Forum for Peace’s 2021 Assembly, where international representatives of several Muslim, Jewish and Christian denominations gathered to discuss the ideal of inclusive citizenship on faith-based grounds.

The Marrakech Declaration can also be used in non-Muslim countries to promote the message of constructive co-existence, with its final call to action having international applicability:

*“We hereby: Call upon Muslim scholars and intellectuals around the world to develop a jurisprudence of the concept of “citizenship” which is inclusive of diverse groups. Such jurisprudence shall be rooted in Islamic tradition and principles and mindful of global change; Urge Muslim educational institutions and authorities to conduct a courageous review of educational curricula that addresses honestly and effectively any material that instigates aggression and extremism, leads to war and chaos, and results in the destruction of our shared societies; Call upon politicians and decision makers to take the political and legal steps necessary to establish a constitutional contractual relationship among its citizens.”<sup>16</sup>*

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14 Executive Summary of the Marrakech Declaration, January 2016, <https://www.marrakeshdeclaration.org/> (Accessed March 2023).

15 Wilton Park Dialogues on Inclusive Citizenship: Dialogue Report 2021, June 2021, online at: <https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Inclusive-Citizenship-Dialogue-Report.pdf> (Accessed March 2023).

16 Ibid.

The Marrakesh Declaration itself has been well-received worldwide. It was praised by former US President Barack Obama;<sup>17</sup> promoted by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Istanbul, which encouraged all member states to establish their own bodies for the internal advancement of inter-religious tolerance in-line with the Declaration;<sup>18</sup> and endorsed by the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, who have helped to implement the document in Egypt, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Senegal, Sudan, and Tunisia.<sup>19</sup> Its success in both Muslim and secular countries can be attributed to the fact that it is complementary to secular models of minority rights and religious freedom whilst also faithful to Islamic tradition. It can thus serve as a starting point for promoting Muslim engagement with FoRB in the UK.



17 Matt Nosanchuk, “President Obama Speaks at the Righteous Among the Nations Ceremony”, January 2016, online at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2016/01/27/president-obama-speaks-righteous-among-nations-ceremony> (Accessed March 2023).

18 Final Communiqué of the 13th Islamic Summit of the Heads of State/Government of the OIC Member States, (Istanbul), April 2016, <https://www.oic-oci.org/docdown/?docID=14&refID=5> (Accessed March 2023).

19 See The Network for Traditional and Religious Peacemakers, “Implementing the Marrakesh Declaration: Road toward the Peaceful Coexistence of Religions”, online at: <https://www.peacemakersnetwork.org/implementing-marrakesh-declaration-road-toward-peaceful-coexistence-religions/> (Accessed March 2023).



## b) The Alliance of Virtue

Following the success of the Marrakesh Declaration, the Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace decided to apply its philosophy to an interfaith context, bringing the Islamic discourse on tolerance into dialogue with that of other religions. This began with a conference in Washington, D.C., in January 2018 where over 400 representatives of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam assembled in the spirit of the “Alliance of Virtue” (*Hilf al-Fudul*) supported by the Prophet Muhammad in early 7th century Mecca to establish justice for all through collective action.

At this conference, participants were invited to present the spiritual foundations for tolerance and coexistence within their own sacred texts, histories, and traditions. These discussions did not turn a blind eye to theological differences, nor understate the importance of preserving the unique identities of each tradition. It did, however, seek to discern the shared values which unite them, towards developing an understanding of FoRB and minority rights that can account for both the universal and the particular.

The outcome was a new initiative, The Charter of the New Alliance of Virtue, which called to:





**AFFIRM** the shared values of the Abrahamic faiths, as well as the rights with which all human beings are naturally endowed;

**ASSERT** that religions of the Abrahamic family have common and distinct theological and ethical traditions, each of which values human virtues, and each of which requires peace and mutual respect and tolerance in order to flourish;

**ASSERT** that collaboration between people of all religious faiths or beliefs provides an effective vehicle to strengthen the foundations of peace in the world;

**ASSERT** that an alliance among people of all faiths, each drawing upon his or her respective tradition to elevate the virtues conducive to respect, tolerance, and peace, can help extinguish the flames of war and defeat the agents of terror and conflict;

**RECALL** that in important instances the institution of accords and charters, historically, have had great impact upon international relations and the establishment of peace, justice, liberty, and tolerance;

**RECALL** that among such accords historically was the Alliance of Virtue, which was convened in 7th century Mecca;

**RECALL** that another such accord was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was promulgated in 1948;

**CONSIDER** the current state of global affairs, recalling that religion continues to play a vital role in global governance and cultural diplomacy, and the dire need for a 21st Century Alliance of Virtue;<sup>20</sup>

**BUILD UPON** international law and the resolutions of the United Nations;

**BUILD UPON** the Amman Message (Nov 2004),<sup>21</sup> the “Common

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20 Paraphrased.

21 The Amman Message is a statement issued by King Abdullah II of Jordan in 2004 which calls for unity in the Muslim world. The statement can be found online at: <https://ammanmessage.com/> (Accessed March 2023).

Word” open letter (Oct 2007),<sup>22</sup> the Marrakesh Declaration for the Rights of Religious Minorities in Muslim-Majority Lands (Jan 2016), the Washington Declaration of the Alliance of Virtue for the Common Good (Feb 2018), the Human Fraternity Declaration;<sup>23</sup>

**ACKNOWLEDGE** the Roman Catholic Church’s Declaration of Religious Freedom which laid the foundation for the Roman Catholic Church to recognize religious freedom for other people based on human dignity;<sup>24</sup>

**ACKNOWLEDGE** also other declarations affirming the values expressed in this Charter and their importance in various religious traditions and denominations;

**BE INSPIRED BY** the American Peace Caravan in Abu Dhabi (May 2017), Rabat (Oct 2017), and the numerous conferences in which the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim societies has participated;

**CONSIDER** the recommendations from the previous annual assemblies of the Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace, which inspired the New Alliance of Virtue.

The Alliance of Virtue was established between the three Abrahamic faiths, however could be extended to incorporate other religious traditions. To do so would require members of other communities to seek the scriptural and historical bases for such principles as diversity of opinion, tolerance and co-existence, and subsequently put those into dialogue with others towards an authentically ecumenical mode of conflict resolution. In the following section, we offer some suggestions as to how this approach might be achieved in a British context.

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22 “A Common Word between Us and You” is an open letter from Muslim to Christian leaders encouraging positive relations between the faiths. <https://www.acommonword.com/> (Accessed March 2023).

23 The Human Fraternity Declaration is a treaty signed by His Holiness Pope Francis and The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, to affirm the ecumenical aspirations of Muslims and Catholics in the East and West. The Declaration can be read online at: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/pa-pa-francesco\\_20190204\\_documento-fratellanza-umana.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/pa-pa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html) (Accessed March 2023).

24 Dignitatis Humanae: On the Right of the Person and of Communities to Social and Civil Freedom in Matters Religious, Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI, 7 December 1965. Online at: [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651207\\_dignitatis-humanae\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html) (Accessed March 2023).

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Marrakesh Declaration and the Alliance of Virtue utilise resources from within major religious traditions to respond to contemporary FoRB discourse. In doing so, they can help towards a new paradigm of FoRB that is genuinely inclusive of the perspectives of all religious communities, taking into account the particular beliefs they hold and creatively relating to the foundational principles of secular societies. In order to achieve this, we offer the following recommendations for faith, civic and political leaders in the UK:

## Recommendations for Faith Leaders:

- Draw upon the Marrakesh Declaration to demonstrate the legitimacy of FoRB within Islam, and apply this template when engaging with local authorities and civil society organisations working on FoRB matters, including the UK FoRB Forum.
- Encourage faith groups to work with the Forum for Peace to develop capacity building of religious leaders and communities through educational and training programmes based on the Marrakesh Declaration and the Alliance of Virtue.





## Recommendations for Civil Society Leaders:

- Conduct training for staff and volunteers, using the Marrakesh Declaration and the Alliance of Virtue, to help individuals working in a multi-faith context understand the importance of FoRB by drawing on traditional and religious frameworks.
- Invite the Forum for Peace to facilitate workshops and/or training for organisations or departments working in this area.





## Recommendations for Policymakers:

- Make this handbook recommended or required reading for those working in FoRB-related fields.
- Recruit trusted advisors who can be called upon on a regular or ad hoc basis to advise on relevant issues from within the traditions concerned to ensure accurate representation of religious perspectives, and ensure these individuals hold positions of influence and authority within their communities.

The Forum for Peace exists to support faith leaders, civil society and policymakers, to take a strategic approach that advances FoRB for all and does so in a way that is grounded in religious teachings. It is therefore open to consultation and collaboration, and warmly welcomes organisations and individuals to get in touch through our website: [forumforpeace.net](https://forumforpeace.net)



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# ABOUT THE FORUM FOR PEACE

The Forum for Peace is a peacebuilding initiative founded by the world-renowned Islamic legal scholar Shaykh Abdallah bin Bayyah. Since 2014 it has sought to respond to the challenges facing religious communities in the modern world and reconcile traditional teachings with the demands of international law. Renowned for its unique approach of drawing on Islamic scripture and legal philosophy to address conflicts within Muslim societies, the Forum has since grown to include other faith groups in search of the shared values that unite them. It is now a registered charity in the United Kingdom, where it works with faith communities to seek common ground through dialogue and scriptural reasoning. Having been represented at the UK Government's 2022 International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief, it is an ambassador of both Freedom of Religion or Belief and the theological bases that underlie it.



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