

Quran-burning 2023: Wake-up call for an "International Declaration on Respect toward Islam and its Symbols"

**A modest initiative for more world peace and an appeal
for reflection, to Islam experts and academics, on the sad
occasion of the burning of a copy of the Quran in Sweden
on 22.01.2023**

(English and German Version)

Khaled Radhouani

Center for Islamic Theology

University of Tübingen

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

﴿ إِنَّا نَحْنُ نَزَّلْنَا الذِّكْرَ وَإِنَّا لَهُ لَحَافِظُونَ ﴾ [الحجر: 9]

Indeed, it is We who sent down the Qur'an and indeed, We will be its guardian.

[The Holy Quran Q. 15/9]

﴿ بَلْ هُوَ قُرْءَانٌ مَّجِيدٌ ﴿٢١﴾ فِي لَوْحٍ مَّحْفُوظٍ ﴿٢٢﴾ ﴾ [البروج: 21-22]

(21) But this is an honored Qur'an

(22) [Inscribed] in a Preserved Slate.

[The Holy Quran Q. 85/21-22]



"Where you burn books, you end up burning people"

Heinrich Heine

Abstract

Quran burned, no reaction?! As if it had become a normal occurrence in the meantime, the criminal act of burning the Quran seems to have been accepted without any noteworthy reaction in the Western world. But many unavoidable questions remain unanswered and no one dares to ask them: Do experts who have to do with Islam and/or the Quran also share some of the responsibility in a certain way? In my opinion, the indifference and the double standards of the Western world, as manifested in politics and media, do not exempt academics and researchers from the ethical duty to deal with many hard but long-concealed necessary questions. Isn't it time to give a clear answer to Islamophobic hate preachers? Wouldn't a kind of "***International Declaration on the Respect of Islam and its Symbols***" make sense? This modest work tries to get closer to this dream, represents a draft for such a declaration, and invites all academics, who also identify themselves as peacekeepers, at least to think about it and to discuss this topic in scientific and academic frameworks. It is an invitation to objective minds to dare a self-critical scientific reflection about their vision of Islam and Muslims. In my opinion, this is the best contribution that scholars around the world could make to the protection of fundamental ethical world values. Respect for Islam and the Quran should finally be understood and perceived as one of these basic universal VALUES.

1. Introduction

In today's so-called "globalized" world, huge events are marching, which, despite their decisive importance and their fatal consequences for our peaceful coexistence as world citizens, unfortunately no longer arouse any reaction.

By "burning a copy of the Quran", in a way that is both abominable and inhuman, the multidimensional religiously colored phenomenon of "Islamophobia", which must be strongly and firmly condemned, is now reaching dangerous levels in Europe and the world and warning of fatal consequences: it is not only accepted but even made a trend. While on January 22nd, 2023 a copy of the Quran, the holiest symbol of an important world religion, was ruthlessly burned by a "right-wing extremist politician"¹ in Sweden in the middle of Europe, in public and under state protection, the Western world not only remains as good as without a condemning reaction but also seems to have perceived this terrible act as "normal" and even again as a kind of "freedom of expression"!

I would find it neither relevant nor useful here to go into detail concerning this last famous controversial argument of freedom of expression, which is repeatedly and selectively used by certain voices in the West, particularly when it comes to attacks on Islamic holy symbols. That is not the aim of this initiative. In my opinion, It is sufficient, that the proponents of this argument must explain to the world, whether this "freedom" is also applied to all religions and their followers. A Swedish writer wanted to burn a Torah and the Bible in Stockholm. Unlike the burning of the Quran, the local authorities did not permit the protest action!

However, a somewhat deeper look at this event shows that, in my opinion, the damage is not limited to having repeatedly deeply hurt the feelings of over two billion people in this cruel way and caused their anger and disappointment, but is also extending to the now entrenched and dominant indifference of politics and society toward such scandalous horrible Islamophobic acts.

In addition to the insouciance and the double standards of politics and media, there is now another dangerous aspect: a certain "scientific-academic indifference" about earth-shattering events is now slowly but surely established in the self-proclaimed "civilized" world. Even among concerned scholars, such as orientalist or Muslim theologians in Western universities, who are supposed to be experts and should provide clarification in such cases, insouciance and almost astonishing "deadly silence" are dominant! For my part, I had to think about it for a relatively long time, before I could decide to transform the following reflections, which went through my mind in the last few days about this very terrible and worrying event, into a kind of "message" to scholars and experts dealing with Islam. However, this hesitation was defeated by the conviction that passivity and silence do not seem to help the world and the next generations solve this complex problem. The shock of this sad truth and the perception of my task, as a Muslim, academic, and above all as a human being, has moved me to take the initiative and call for a kind of "***International declaration on respect for Islam and its symbols***" and to create a draft for it. This step might seem to be utopic for many people, but the way to big Targets always starts with small dreams. This modest contribution is primarily intended as a message

¹ Repeating the name of this criminal could „eternize“ him. That’s why I don’t cite it here.

and a call for reflection to all other peace supporters in the world, but especially to Islam-concerned experts and academics, who deal with Islam. I am not an exception, because I see myself as both the initiator and recipient of this message and this appeal. As a Muslim academic, I also feel it is my task to deal with the difficult questions that are currently being raised in Europe by such earth-shattering dramatic events, as the burning of the Quran, and to find convincing answers. We should all learn certain ethical and scientific lessons even from dramatic facts.

2. Basic Notes

a. *The Quran remains protected forever*

It should be clear that the aim of this article, just like the background of the protests of Muslims around the world against the burning of the Quran, is not to "protect" the Quran itself from possible harm. It is rather a matter of protecting certain values and the feelings of billions of people, who feel special respect for their Holy Book, in a way that others possibly do not know. This fact should be accepted too. It has to be understood, that Muslims around the world have no fears in terms of the "protection" of the Quran as Holy Book. The reason is easy to understand: Th God's protection of the Text and the messages of the Quran is beyond doubt for Muslims. This is clearly emphasized not only in the Quran and the Sunnah (tradition of the Prophet). In this sense, no one can harm the Qur'an. It is a rock-solid conviction for every devout Muslim, which can be proven to this day. This divine protection includes the past, the present, and the future. Nor is this initiative intended as a "defense" of Islam. This great religion can represent and defend itself very well, as has been the case for over 1400 years. This divine promise for eternal protection turns out to be a historical truth for every objective person. The Qur'an was divinely protected both before (Q. 85/21-22) and after its revelation (Q. 15/9) to the Prophet Muḥammad ^(PBUH)² and will continue to be protected, as long as God wants.

The intention behind this initiative is rather to call for "respect for others" in the truest sense of the word and to defend a peaceful, unprejudiced coexistence of religions based on mutual respect. Therefore:

*I appeal to all peacekeepers in the world to condemn the Quran burning in the strongest possible terms and thus all similar actions/acts that show disrespect for Islam, its symbols, and its Believers, just like they would rightly do in other events. I invite all scholars of Islam to reflect deeply on this phenomenon and their possible contribution to the fight against Islamophobia. It is a call for deep reflection on the necessity of such a **declaration of respect for Islam and its symbols**. I also ask them to discuss this dilemma with people in their academic and intellectual environment.*

² Peace be upon him (islamic ritual expression of respect toward all the Prophets and the messenger Muḥammad.

b. The World will be busy with the Quran forever

As already promised by the Prophet Muḥammed ^(SAS)³, the Holy Quran will always remain inexhaustible because of its uniqueness "*la yaḥlaq min kaṭrat ar-radd*".⁴ The reality, the number of Qur'anic studies, and the preoccupation of countless scholars with the Qur'an up to the present day confirm this fact. Even the hostile acts against the Quran have so far only led to more attention and admiration for this holy book.

c. Why this initiative?

Is the task of intellectuals and academics limited to purely scientific work? To what extent should they also participate as active members of their society? Is there a certain contribution that Orientalists and Islamic scholars should also make against Islamophobic hate preachers? These questions, which have occupied the scholarly world intensively through history, seem to have been discussed long ago, but they certainly prevail - in one way or another - again and again, when it comes to world events related to Islam, such as the Quran-burning. In my opinion, academics and scholars are therefore called upon to do something against Islamophobic clichés, that were initially founded in Western scholarship, for example by some orientalists in the field of Islamic studies. They are faced with the ethical and scientific responsibility of condemning hostile acts against Islam and the Quran and, at the same time, freeing themselves and their audience from old prejudiced thoughts toward this religion.

d. Paper burned: yes, Quran burned: NO!

In truth, only paper was burned by that Danish hate preacher, the Quran itself and its great religious and ethical values remain untouched in the hearts of believers and cannot be burned! The hearts filled with hate of the Quran are "burned" by this hate.

e. From what perspective is this call intended?

Based on the divine Quranic command to the Prophet and Messenger Muḥammad ^(PBUH), I address this message to all of you here, based on "wisdom and beautiful admonition" and mutual respect:

[Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful admonition, and argue with them in the best way. Surely your Lord knows very well those who stray from His path, and He knows very well those who are rightly guided.] (Q. 16-125)

That's why:

I call on all of us to work for respect toward Islam, its prophet, its holy book, and, above all, its worldview and universal values, as we exactly must do with all other religions and cultures.

Furthermore, I am not claiming to represent "Islam" or all Muslims here, but I am firmly convinced, that the vast majority of them share my feelings and thoughts in this regard and support the message I want to convey here.

The present modest draft does not claim to be perfect, or to have reached the final goal, but represents a step on the road to enlightenment. The most important thing is that we agree on the VALUES it contains.

³ This tradition is documented in numerous Ḥadith collections, such as Tirmidī, *aṣ-sunan* (Nr. 2976); Baihaqī, *Šu'ab al-īmān* (Nr. 1883).

3. *International Declaration on Respect for Islam and its Symbols (Proposal draft)*

- *Any attack on Islam and/or its sacred symbols, such as the Quran or the Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH), should be condemned in the strongest possible terms by all conscientious people, but also by academics and intellectuals, and declared as a barbaric act.*
- *The universal values based on respect, peaceful coexistence, solidarity, and cooperation should be applied equally to all people and all religions. When the Qur'an is attacked, these values are also attacked. Even if politicians and the media want to view events through the eye of double standards, concerned experts should distance themselves from this unfair attitude when approaching such events. Just as other attacks on other cultures around the world have been condemned by intellectuals, they should also condemn and prevent disregarding acts against Islam and its symbols through an international declaration.*
- *To attack the holy book of a world religion to hit and thereby humiliate the dignity of other people should also be clearly described and condemned as a kind of terror.*
- *Islam and the Quran have no problems with criticism and no fears of dialogue. However, this dialogue should be based on respect, deep knowledge, and good intentions. Furthermore, it should not be used as a propagandistic, political, religious, or other means. Modern scholars and scholars involved with Islam should understand this message and explain it to the world.*
- *Experts should also feel jointly responsible for the fight against Islamophobia. Indeed, it must be admitted that blind Islamophobic acts are not only due to brainwashing, political popularism, or other social and cultural factors. Many long-standing prejudices regarding Islam, the Quran, and/or the Prophet Muḥammed(PBUH) arose partly in orientalist Quran research and have become anchored in the Western reception of Islam over time.*
- *Just as Islam respects all other revelations, as revealed by God, it should also be respected that the Holy Qur'an is considered by Muslim believers to be the divine revelation and miracle of Prophet Muḥammad(PBUH). This truth does not have to be accepted by everyone, but it must be respected by everyone. Moreover, we should all condemn any approach to religious symbols that deals disrespectfully with other people's beliefs under the pretext of freedom of expression.*
- *Respect toward Islam and the Quran should be protected in many ways, for example through an international agreement that truly demonstrates the international community's solidarity with global solidarity.*
- *The Qur'an invites all other peoples and cultures to dialogue. Nevertheless, a fruitful dialogue between other religions and/or cultures and Islam should only*

be based on respect for its symbols and worldview. Such Islamophobic attacks must neither be accepted nor justified on the ground of "freedom of expression".

- *Islam experts should not only remain spectators in such attacks on the Quran but also take the initiative in the future and participate in "illuminating" their society about it.*
- *The task of "illuminating" Western societies about Islam seems more necessary than ever and requires more academic work, scientific conferences, and other relevant efforts in the future.*
- *Islamophobia and attacks against the Qur'an are a clear threat to world peace and pose a big challenge to the world's peacekeepers. The international community, but also scholars and experts dealing with Islam, are ethically obliged to discuss this problem and find solutions.*