Covalent Organic Framework Constructed by Clicking Azido Porphyrin with Perpropargyloxy-Cucurbit[6]uril for Electrocatalytic Hydrogen Generation from Water Splitting

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Cite This: *ACS Appl. Energy Mater.* 2021, 4, 3535–3543

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ABSTRACT: In the present study, we describe the synthesis and characterization of a new covalent organic framework (COF-TPP-CB[6]) which was assembled together by clicking perpropargyloxy cucurbit[6]uril (CB[6]) to the azido-functionalized tetraphenylporphyrin (TPP-4N₃) through a copper-catalyzed azide–alkyne cycloaddition reaction (CuAAC). Perpropargyloxy CB[6] was synthesized through the direct oxidation of CB[6] to afford perhydroxy CB[6] followed by subsequent O-propargylation using NaH. We also demonstrated that the resulting framework (COF-TPP-CB[6]) can be employed as an efficient and stable electrocatalyst for hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) in alkaline medium upon loading it with a nickel cocatalyst. The effect of TiO₂ and different loadings of Ni on the HER performance of TPP-CB[6] was also studied. Herein, 12%Ni@TPP-CB[6] as the optimum catalyst showed an impressive H₂ production rate of 18.7 mmol h^{−1} g^{−1} with a low onset potential of −250 mV.

KEYWORDS: covalent organic framework, perpropargyloxy cucurbit[6]uril, porphyrin, click reaction, electrocatalytic hydrogen production, water splitting, nickel

1. INTRODUCTION

Multifunctional supramolecular assemblies have emerged as promising candidates for a wide range of applications owing to their well-designed structures and outstanding properties.^{1–3} Porphyrins are highly attractive building blocks used in the construction of supramolecular assemblies due to their rigidity, planar structure, ease of chemical modification, and chemical flexibility and stability. Thanks to their large π -conjugated aromatic domain, porphyrins exhibit remarkable photophysical and electrochemical properties.^{4–7} Furthermore, their superior structural properties facilitate the attachment of various functionalities to their large hydrophobic cores, thereby providing multifunctional assemblies with diverse functionalities and potential applications in biomedicine, electro/photo catalysis, molecular electronics, artificial light harvesting, sensing, and so forth.^{4–16}

Porphyrins can be covalently or noncovalently modified.¹⁷ Cucurbit[*n*]urils, CB[*n*]s (*n* = 5–10), are robust macrocyclic structures that are formed from supramolecular assemblies with porphyrins mainly through noncovalent interactions,^{2,18–26} in which functionalized CB[*n*]s do not attach directly to the porphyrin core. CB[*n*]s composed of *n* glycoluril units linked by methylene bridges. They are composed of two partially negatively charged hydrophilic carbonyl rims and a hydrophobic cavity. Outstanding features such as rigid structure, high chemical stability, low toxicity, high guest binding affinity, and size selectivity enable CB[*n*]s

to act as interesting synthetic receptors and building blocks for supramolecular assemblies.^{2,27,28} Synthesis of functionalized CB[*n*]s derivatives is of crucial importance as it can facilitate the design of various supramolecular assemblies with developed applications.²⁹ There are two main ways to introduce functional groups on CB[*n*]s: the use of functionalized precursors²⁹ and postfunctionalization.^{30,31} The latter approach seems to be more practical as it allows the modification of CB[*n*]s in moderate yields. Unfortunately, direct functionalization of CB[*n*]s is still a challenging aspect because of their high stability.³¹ Hence, studies on the synthesis and application of functionalized CB[*n*]s in nanostructures are still limited.^{28,32,33} Accordingly, examples on covalently linked CB[*n*]-porphyrin assemblies are quite rare. One of the first studies on the covalent porphyrin-CB[*n*] multifunctional supramolecular assemblies was reported by our group in 2018 by conjugation of monopropargyloxy-CB[7] to a triglycosylated-porphyrin (TPP) core via copper-catalyzed azide–alkyne cycloaddition (Cu-AAC) reaction.³⁴ The pre-

Received: December 30, 2020

Accepted: March 10, 2021

Published: March 18, 2021

pared conjugate was then employed in photodynamic antibacterial and cancer therapy.³⁵ Another CB[n]-porphyrin conjugation was then reported by our group in 2019 in which the monohydroxyl-CB[7] was conjugated to 4(TEG-OH)-TPP core. The as-prepared assembly was employed for electrophotocatalytic hydrogen generation from water splitting as well as photodynamic antibacterial and cancer therapy.^{36,37} In the present paper, we report a CB[6] and porphyrin-based covalent organic framework. We first synthesized CB6(O-P)_n by direct functionalization of CB[6] and then it was covalently attached to porphyrin core (TPP-Zn-4N₃) through Cu-AAC click reaction to construct TPP-CB[6] covalent organic framework.

Electrocatalytic water splitting for efficient production of high purity hydrogen (and oxygen) is widely regarded as a promising process to transform and store renewable energy.^{38–40} Recently, growing interest in porphyrin-based hydrogen generation catalysts has been received due to their considerable synthetic flexibility, redox behavior, chemical stability, and tunable optoelectronic properties. Accordingly, the fabrication and development of new porphyrin-based electrocatalysts to promote the hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) to produce hydrogen from water splitting is of great importance.^{41–43} In this regard, the electrocatalytic properties of the newly developed COF-TPP-CB[6] has been investigated in the electrocatalytic hydrogen generation from water splitting. Moreover, this framework is able to accommodate Ni ions as a cocatalyst because of the presence of various binding sites including carbonyl portals of CBs and triazole units for Ni ions to coordinate with.

2. EXPERIMENTAL SECTION

2.1. Chemicals. Propargyl bromide, sodium hydride, sodium azide, pyrrole, glycoluril, potassium persulfate, sodium hydride, zinc acetate, dimethyl sulfoxide, diethyl ether, chloroform, methanol, and all the other chemicals and reagents used for organic syntheses were of analytical grade and obtained from Sigma-Aldrich, unless otherwise stated. The deuterated solvent DMSO-*d*₆ used in NMR was purchased from Merck. Nickel acetate tetra hydrate, titanium dioxide (TiO₂), potassium hydroxide, platinum on carbon (Pt/C), phosphate-buffered saline (PBS), and sulfuric acid 95–98% used in electrochemical experiments were obtained from Sigma-Aldrich. Nafion (5% w/w in water and 1-propanol, Alfa Aesar) was used as a binder during the preparation of electrode. Ultrapure deionized water ($R \geq 18 \text{ M}\Omega \text{ cm}^{-1}$) from a Milli-Q plus water purification system (Millipore, Bedford, MA, U.S.A.) was used throughout the study.

2.2. Material Characterization. ¹H NMR spectra were obtained at 400 MHz, using Bruker Avance III 400 MHz NMR spectrometer. Mass spectra were carried out using Agilent 6210 LC/MS TOF mass spectrometer. Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) imaging and energy dispersive X-ray (EDX) analysis were carried out using FEI Technai G2 F30 SEM. Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) imaging was done by FEI Tecnai G² Spirit BioTwin CTEM (Central Laboratory, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey). A gas adsorption analyzer (Quantachrome autosorb iQ) was used to measure the Brunauer–Emmett–Teller (BET) surface area from nitrogen adsorption–desorption isotherms. Prior to the analysis the samples were degassed in vacuum at 90 °C for 2 h. Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FT–IR) was recorded on a Bruker Alpha-II Platinum ATR FT–IR spectrometer. Optical absorption spectra were recorded with Cary 300 UV–vis spectrophotometer. X-ray diffraction patterns were recorded by the X-ray diffractometer (XRD, X'pert pro MPD, PANalytical Empyrean) equipped with a Cu K α irradiation source. (40 kV, 45 mA, $\lambda = 1.5405 \text{ \AA}$). Chemical and elemental analyses were determined using X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) (Thermo Fisher Scientific). Measurements were performed

with a spot size of $\sim 400 \text{ }\mu\text{m}$, 30 eV pass energy, and 0.1 eV step size. Thermal stability of the compound was studied using TA Instruments Q500 thermogravimetric analyzer.

2.3. Synthesis and Characterization of Precursors. 5,10,15,20-Tetrakis(α -bromo-*p*-tolyl)porphyrin (TPP-4Br), 5,10,15,20-tetrakis(α -azido-*p*-tolyl) porphyrin (TPP-4N₃), azido-functionalized metalated-porphyrin (TPP-Zn-4N₃), and CB[6] were synthesized according to the literature procedures.^{34,44,45}

2.3.1. Synthesis of Perhydroxy-CB[6], CB6(OH)_n. CB6(OH)_n was synthesized according to the literature procedure.³⁰ A slurry mixture of CB[6] (1.00 g, 1.00 mmol) and K₂S₂O₈ (3.90 g, 14.4 mmol) in 50 mL degassed, deionized water was refluxed at 85 °C for 6 h under nitrogen atmosphere. The reaction mixture was then cooled down to room temperature and filtered. The precipitate was removed and the filtrate was concentrated to 25 mL under reduced pressure. Acetone vapor diffusion into the resulting solution gave a white precipitation, which was collected by filtration, washed with acetone, and dried in vacuum oven to give CB6(OH)_n as a white solid. Yield: 950 mg, 62%.

ESI–MS (m/z): calcd for C₃₆H₃₆O₂₄N₂₄Na [M12+Na]⁺: 1211.2233, found: 1211.2002; calcd. for C₃₆H₃₆O₂₄N₂₄K [M12+K]⁺: 1227.19727, found: 1227.1999; calcd. for C₃₆H₃₆O₂₃N₂₄K [M11+K]⁺: 1211.20235, found: 1211.2002; calcd. for C₃₆H₃₆O₂₄N₂₄Na₂ [M12 + 2Na]⁺: 617, found: 617.0893; calcd. for C₃₆H₃₆O₂₄N₂₄KNa [M12+NaK]⁺: 625.0935, found: 625.0839; calcd. for C₃₆H₃₆O₂₄N₂₄K₂ [M12 + 2K]²⁺: 633.0804, found: 633.0814; calcd. for C₃₆H₃₆O₂₃N₂₄Na₂ [M11 + 2Na]²⁺: 609.1091, found: 609.0897; calcd. for C₃₆H₃₆O₂₃N₂₄K₂ [M11 + 2K]²⁺: 625.0830, found: 625.0839; calcd. for C₃₆H₃₆O₂₂N₂₄Na₂ [M10 + 2Na]²⁺: 601.1116, found: 601.0867; where M is CB6(OH) and *n* is the number of hydroxy groups, $M_n \approx \text{CB6(OH)}_n$.

2.3.2. Synthesis of Perpropargyloxy-CB[6] (CB6(O-P)_n). CB6(O-P)_n was synthesized modifying the literature procedure.³⁰ To a stirred solution of CB6(OH)_n (500 mg, 0.42 mmol) in 12 mL dry DMSO, NaH (239 mg, 9.98 mmol) was added at room temperature (RT) and under an inert nitrogen atmosphere. After 3 h stirring at RT, propargyl bromide (0.9 mL, 10 mmol) was added into the reaction flask. The reaction mixture was stirred at RT overnight, followed by adding 3 mL methanol at 0 °C. The flask content was then poured into 200 mL diethyl ether, brownish solid was precipitated out, collected by filtration, and washed several times with water and diethyl ether. The product was finally oven-dried at 50 °C to give CB6(O-P)_n as a brownish solid. Yield: 368 mg, 65%.

ESI–MS (m/z): calcd for C₅₁H₄₆O₂₂N₂₄Na [M10P5+Na]⁺: 1369.3117, found: 1369.2739; calcd. for C₅₁H₄₆O₂₃N₂₄Na [M11P5+Na]⁺: 1385.3066, found: 1385.2709; calcd. for C₅₇H₅₀O₂₄N₂₄K [M12P7 + 2Na]⁺: 1493.3068, found: 1493.2590; calcd. for C₄₂H₄₀O₁₆N₂₄Na₂ [M4P2 + 2Na]²⁺: 591.1425, found: 591.1477; calcd. for C₃₉H₃₈O₂₂N₂₄Cl₃ [M10P1 + 3Cl]³⁺: 433.055, found: 433.2274; calcd. for C₃₉H₃₈O₂₂N₂₄H₃ [M10P1 + 3H]³⁺: 399.1943, found: 399.2046; where M_n is CB6(OH)_n and P_m is the number of propargyloxy groups, $M_nP_m \approx \text{CB6(OH)}_n(\text{O-propargyl})_m$.

2.4. Synthesis of COF-TPP-CB[6]. CB6(O-P)_n (129 mg, 0.089 mmol) and TPP-Zn-4N₃ (80 mg, 0.09 mmol) were separately dissolved in 2 mL DMSO and then the solutions were mixed together. The mixture was stirred at 120 °C for 30 min. A solution of copper sulfate (2.0 mg, 0.013 mmol) and sodium ascorbate (4.0 mg, 0.020 mmol) in 1 mL water was then added into the well stirred solution of reaction monomers. The reaction mixture was stirred at 120 °C for 96 h. The progress of the reaction was monitored using FT–IR. After the completion of reaction (by disappearing of the azide band), the flask content was suspended in 20 mL water, brownish solid was precipitated out, filtered, washed several times with water and chloroform to remove the catalyst and excess precursors, and dried in vacuum oven at 50 °C to afford COF-TPP-CB[6] as a brownish powder. Yield: 150 mg.

2.5. Electrochemical Measurements. Electrochemical experiments were performed using a CHI-670 potentiostat (CH Instruments, China) at room temperature in a three-electrode cell configuration with Ag/AgCl/KCl(sat.), Pt wire, and ink coated fluorine tinoxide (FTO) as the reference, counter and working electrodes,

Scheme 1. Synthesis of COF-TPP-CB[6]: (i) $\text{K}_2\text{S}_2\text{O}_8$, H_2O , 85°C , 6 h, N_2 ; (ii) NaH , Dry DMSO, Propargyl Bromide, 25°C , Overnight, N_2 ; and (iii) DMSO, Copper Sulfate/Sodium Ascorbate, 120°C , 96 h

respectively. The electrochemical experiments were measured in a 0.1 M KOH electrolyte. Prior to each experiment, electrolyte was deaerated with Ar gas (99.999% of purity) for 30 min. Strips of $10 \times 20 \text{ mm}^2$ of 2 mm thick FTO glass were cut from a sheet obtained from Sigma-Aldrich and before the electrode coating, FTO substrates were cleaned using water and detergent, followed by sequential sonication in water and isopropanol for 15 min and dried in air. FTO surface was then activated at 450°C for 2 h.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Synthesis and Characterization of COF-TPP-CB[6]. The synthetic route to obtain the target TPP-CB6 covalent organic framework is provided in Scheme 1. This procedure involves the copper-catalyzed azide–alkyne cycloaddition (Cu-AAC) of TPP-Zn-4N₃ and CB6(O-P)_n as reaction monomers to form polytriazoles. CB[6], CB6(O-H)_n, TPP-4Br, TPP-4N₃, and TPP-Zn-4N₃ were synthesized according to the previously reported procedures.^{30,34,44,45} Treatment of CB6(OH)_n with excess sodium hydride in DMSO followed by its reaction with propargyl bromide afforded CB6(O-P)_n. Both CB[6] derivatives were characterized by ^1H NMR, FT-IR, and ESI-mass spectroscopic techniques (Figures S1–S6 of the Supporting Information, SI). The appearance of alkyne stretching signals at 2158 cm^{-1} ($\text{C}\equiv\text{C}$) and 3258 cm^{-1} ($-\text{C}\equiv\text{C}-\text{H}$) in the FT-IR spectrum of the CB6(O-P)_n (Figure S6a) compared to CB6(OH)_n (Figure S6b) further confirmed the success of the propargylation reaction (Figure S3). Azidation of TPP-4Br with excess sodium azide afforded TPP-4N₃ in 93% yield.³⁴ Before proceeding with the (Cu-AAC) reaction, the core of TPP-4N₃ was metalated with Zn to prevent inclusion of Cu, which

will decrease its catalytic effect. The metalation procedure was simply performed by refluxing of TPP-4N₃ with zinc acetate in methanol to obtain Zn(II)-porphyrin.³⁴ The synthesized porphyrin derivatives were fully characterized by ^1H NMR, FT-IR, ESI-mass and UV-vis spectroscopic techniques (Figures S7–S14).

Having the monomers prepared, here comes the final step to get the target covalently attached TPP-CB[6] organic framework. To do so, a simple Cu-AAC reaction was applied between CB6(O-P)_n (1 equiv) and TPP-Zn-4N₃ (1 equiv) in DMSO solvent at 120°C . The progress of the reaction was monitored by FT-IR to make sure the azide groups of the porphyrin reacted with the alkyne groups of propargyloxy functionalities of CB[6] via AAC reaction.

The as-synthesized COF-TPP-CB[6] was insoluble in water and organic solvents due to the 3D network structure, and it was fully characterized with ^1H NMR, FT-IR, XPS, SEM, EDX, BET, TGA, and XRD analyses. Although COF-TPP-CB[6] is insoluble in any solvent, we managed to disperse it in DMSO-*d*₆ after overnight stirring at room temperature and recorded its ^1H NMR spectrum (Figure S15). The ^1H NMR spectrum clearly shows the characteristic signals for the protons of CB6, porphyrin, and phenyl units. Figure 1 compares the FT-IR spectra of the COF-TPP-CB[6] with its monomers, TPP-Zn-4N₃ and perpropargyloxy-CB[6]. The appearance of the carbonyl signal at 1735 cm^{-1} and the decrease in the intensity of the azide and alkyne signals at 2095 and 3258 cm^{-1} , respectively, in the FT-IR spectrum of the developed COF-TPP-CB[6] compared to TPP-Zn-4N₃ and CB6(O-P)_n monomers, confirmed the success of Cu-AAC

Figure 1. FT-IR spectra of COF-TPP-CB[6] compared to its monomers, TPP-Zn-4N₃ and CB₆(O-P)_n.

reaction. The chemical composition of the COF-TPP-CB[6] was further investigated using XPS. The C 1s XPS spectrum (Figure 2a) was fitted into six components 284.25, 284.85,

Figure 2. High resolution XPS spectra of (a) C 1s, (b) N 1s, (c) O 1s, and (d) Zn 2p regions for COF-TPP-CB[6].

285.49, 286.40, 287.45, and 288.90 corresponding to the C=C, C-C, C-N, C-O, C=O, and N-C=O bonds, respectively. The XPS signal for N 1s (Figure 2b) was fitted into four components at 397.75 eV for Zn-N, 399.04 eV for pyrrolic-N, 400.17 eV for triazole-N and amine-N, and 401.35 eV for graphitic-N. The O 1s core level peak can be resolved into two components (Figure 2c) centered at 531.75 and 533.26 eV corresponding to the C-O and C=O bonds, respectively. The high-resolution spectrum in the Zn 2p region (Figure 2d) showed spin-orbit doublet peaks at 1044.49 and 1021.41 eV corresponding to Zn 2p_{1/2} and 2p_{3/2}, respectively. The morphology of the COF-TPP-CB[6] was investigated using TEM and SEM which showed a porous structure (Figures 3a,b and S16). The average particle size of the sample was estimated by TEM to be around 40–50 nm. The SEM/EDX elemental mapping for the distribution of C, N, O, and Zn in the COF-TPP-CB[6] along with the corresponding EDX spectrum and atomic percentage of elements are shown in Figures 2c and S17, respectively. Powder XRD pattern of COF-TPP-CB[6] was recorded (Figure S18a) and showed a crystalline structure with well-defined diffraction peaks at $2\theta = 8.2^\circ$, 18.1° , 22.1° , and 28.3° . The comparison of XRD spectra of COF-TPP-CB[6] and its monomers, TPP-Zn-4N₃ and perpropargyloxy-CB[6], was also provided in Figure S18b.

The textural properties of the COF-TPP-CB[6] were studied using nitrogen physisorption at -196°C , and the results were illustrated in Figures S19–S21. The nitrogen physisorption isotherms (Figure S19) exhibited a Type III isotherm according to the IUPAC classification. The specific surface area and total specific pore volume of the sample calculated with the Brunauer–Emmett–Teller (BET) and Barrett–Joyner–Halenda (BJH) models were found to be $33.17\text{ m}^2\text{ g}^{-1}$ and $0.34\text{ cm}^3\text{ g}^{-1}$, respectively. Pore radius and pore width were measured as 11.74 and 2.41 nm, respectively. The BJH pore size distribution curve (Figure S21) confirms the presence of the mesoporosity in the range of 2–50 nm. It was also revealed that the COF-TPP-CB[6] is composed of agglomerated slit-like particles. Thermal stability of the developed COF-TPP-CB[6] was investigated with TGA analysis in the range of 25 to 900°C with a rate of $10^\circ\text{C min}^{-1}$ under nitrogen atmosphere (Figure S22). The TGA curve exhibited four types of decomposition. The first decomposition (20%) below 200°C is due to the loss of hydroxyl groups and adsorbed water molecules, the second decomposition (10%) around 210°C is probably due to the loss of free azide groups from the compound, the third one

Figure 3. (a) TEM image, (b) SEM image, and (c) the corresponding EDX elemental mapping images of COF-TPP-CB[6].

(10%) at 403 °C arises from the loss of benzene rings attached to the core, and from 550 °C, the sample itself started to gradually decompose.

3.2. Evaluation of the Electrocatalytic HER Activity of COF-TPP-CB[6]. Once we authenticated the structure of the developed COF-TPP-CB[6] by detailed characterization, we next carried out electrochemical studies to evaluate its catalytic performance to produce hydrogen from water splitting. Herein, the main features of our designed assembly include: electrochemically active porphyrin cores as building units with rich multielectron redox chemistry, multifunctionalities such as triazole units, and carbonyl groups at the CBs portals that may coordinate with the metal cocatalyst (Ni) for efficient energy transfer, providing chemical stability to the assembly. Electrochemical studies were begun with COF-TPP-CB[6] containing TiO₂. The ink was prepared by the grinding of COF-TPP-CB[6] with TiO₂ (ratio 1:2) and then mixing of the nanocomposite with water, ethanol, and nafion without any sacrificial agent. The mixture was stirred overnight. A known volume of the prepared ink was then drop cast onto a clean fluorine-doped tin oxide (FTO) glass (2 × 1 cm²) covering an 1 × 1 cm² area. The ink was simply dried at room temperature to get a thin COF-TPP-CB[6]-TiO₂ film over FTO. A detailed procedure of ink preparation was described in the SI.

The electrocatalytic HER performance of the COF-TPP-CB[6]-TiO₂ nanocomposite was first examined in three different electrolytes, namely, acidic (0.25 M H₂SO₄), neutral (0.1 M PBS), and basic (0.1 M KOH) by performing linear sweep voltammetry (LSV) measurement with a scan rate of 10 mV s⁻¹ under the Ar-saturated conditions. Representative LSV curves of geometric current density (mA cm⁻²) vs applied potential were presented in Figure 4a. All the measured potentials are referred to a reversible hydrogen electrode (RHE) based on the Nernst equation. As shown in Figure 4a, COF-TPP-CB[6]-TiO₂ catalyst exhibited a very low cathodic current density with the most negative onset potential (at which the reduction is started) of -700 mV in neutral

medium. Although the COF-TPP-CB[6]-TiO₂ catalyst exhibited a less negative onset potential of -360 mV with high cathodic current density in acidic electrolyte, it was degraded and peeled off during the first run of LSV measurement. Meanwhile, the nanocomposite exhibited moderate HER performance (onset potential -500 mV), however high stability in the basic medium as it survived repeated cycles of measurements. Thus 0.1 M KOH electrolyte was chosen as the optimal condition for further experiments. Aiming to improve the HER electrocatalytic performance of the COF-TPP-CB[6]-TiO₂ catalyst in alkaline medium, nickel (Ni) was introduced as a cocatalyst by grinding the nanocomposite with a known amount of nickel acetate salt to obtain 12% Ni loading. Enormous efforts are being devoted for the development of noble-metal-free electrocatalysts. Therein, electrocatalysts derived from earth-abundant transition metals such as Ni, Co, and Fe have been investigated as promising and cost-effective alternatives in both acidic and alkaline electrolytes.⁴⁶ The special 3d electronic distribution of Ni has given rise to considerable application of Ni-based catalysts toward hydrogen production in the alkaline medium.⁴⁷ Moreover, Direct use of nickel acetate powder with the catalyst provides a straightforward and cost-effective method to boost the electrocatalytic activity. Meanwhile, we also prepared 12%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] catalyst to study the Ni effect in the absence TiO₂. The polarization curves of the samples were exhibited in Figure 4b. Insertion of Ni into the nanocomposite had significant impact on the activity of COF-TPP-CB[6]-TiO₂ by shifting the onset potential from -500 mV to more positive value of -300 mV as well as increasing the cathodic current density. Most remarkably, it was observed that the metalated catalyst without TiO₂ showed the best HER performance with the lowest onset potential of -250 mV as well as the turn over frequency (TOF) value of 0.101 s⁻¹. The electrocatalytic activity of the catalysts increased in the order of COF-TPP-CB[6] < COF-TPP-CB[6]-TiO₂ < 12%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] TiO₂ < 12%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6].

In order to acquire more details on the electrocatalytic kinetics of the studied catalysts, Tafel plots were derived from the linear regions of the LSV curves by plotting overpotential against log current density⁴⁸ (Figure 4c). A Tafel slope is employed to evaluate the kinetics of the system. A lower Tafel slope signifies the faster electrode kinetics. COF-TPP-CB[6]-TiO₂ had the highest Tafel slope of 379 mV dec⁻¹, a value which declined to 267 mV dec⁻¹ by introducing Ni to the nanocomposite. The lowest Tafel slope was achieved by a 12% Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] catalyst without TiO₂ (195 mV dec⁻¹), suggesting the fastest kinetics among the other samples, and it is comparable with other examples of porphyrin-based and nonprecious metal electrocatalysts reported in the literature.^{5,41,49} Exchange current density (ECD, *i*₀) as another important kinetics parameter from the Tafel plot is proportional to the rate of an electrochemical reaction. The higher the ECD, the faster electrochemical reaction. 12%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] exhibited higher ECD of 0.362 mA cm⁻² compared to 12%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6]-TiO₂ (0.272 mA cm⁻²) and faster electrochemical reaction as well. The obtained electrochemical parameters for the studied samples were given in Table S1. Electrochemical calculations were fully described in the SI.

The electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) was applied to study the interfacial charge transfer resistance of samples. The experiments were conducted at -0.4 V vs RHE in 0.1 M KOH for frequency range of 0.1 Hz to 10 kHz.

Figure 4. (a) LSV Polarization curves of COF-TPP-CB[6]-TiO₂ catalyst at 10 mV s⁻¹ in various electrolyte media, (b) LSV polarization curves obtained at 10 mV s⁻¹ in 0.1 M KOH, (c) corresponding Tafel plots in the linear region, and (d) Nyquist plots measured at -0.4 V vs RHE for COF-TPP-CB[6]-TiO₂, 12%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6]-TiO₂, and 12%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] catalysts.

Nyquist plots for the samples were presented in Figure 4d. According to these plots, samples only exhibited the semicircle behavior in the high frequency region. Warburg impedance was not observed in the low frequency region, implying that rapid electron transfer in the electrolyte resulted in kinetically controlled electrochemical reaction on the electrode surface. COF-TPP-CB[6]-TiO₂ possessed the largest semicircle radius which can be defined as the highest amount of charge transfer resistance (R_{ct} of 1727.00 Ω). Introducing Ni in the composite decreased R_{ct} hugely, resulting in fast electron transfer at the interface. Therein, 12%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] in the absence of TiO₂ showed the lowest R_{ct} of 68.60 Ω , which entails that charge carriers would confront smaller charge transfer resistance at the electrode–electrolyte interface. The conjugated π electronic structure of the framework can contribute to this high charge transfer capacity.⁴³ The obtained resistance values for the samples were given in Table S2.

We also measured the double layer capacitance (C_{dl}) of 12% Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] compared to 12%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6]-TiO₂ by performing a series of cyclic voltammetry (CV) measurements in nonfaradaic region of 0 to 0.1 V vs Ag/AgCl at different scan rates (Figure S23a–d, see SI for more experimental details). The results showed that 12%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] exhibited a larger C_{dl} value of 45.11 $\mu\text{F cm}^{-2}$ compared to 12%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6]-TiO₂ (30.27 $\mu\text{F cm}^{-2}$), indicating a higher available electrochemical active surface area (ECSA) which may be responsible for the better electrocatalytic activity of this sample.

Overall, the higher HER performance of 12%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] catalyst compared to COF-TPP-CB[6]-TiO₂ and 12%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6]-TiO₂ can be attributed to the free carbonyl groups of the CB[6] of the framework in the absence of TiO₂ that coordinate with water molecules and facilitate the HER reaction. Effect of Ni amount on the HER performance of the Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] catalyst was further studied by preparing four inks with different Ni loadings in the range from 6% to 47%. The LSV measurements were conducted under the same experimental conditions, and the obtained curves were shown in Figure 5a in comparison with bare FTO. The results indicated that increasing the Ni content from 6% to 12% enhanced the HER performance of the electrocatalyst. However, a further increase in the Ni content diminished the electrocatalytic activity where 47%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] showed the highest onset potential (−400 mV) and the lowest cathodic current density among the samples. This can be attributed to the fact that extra Ni in the catalyst may cause saturation of the active site density. Herein, 12% Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] as the optimum sample exhibited improved HER ability with lowest onset potential of −250 mV and required the lowest overpotential (η) of −0.416 and −0.914 V to reach the current density of 1.0 and 10 mA cm^{-2} , respectively, among the other aforementioned systems. The obtained results are comparable with the porphyrin-based catalysts reported in the literature such as ERGO@CoTMPyP possessing η at 1 mA cm^{-2} of −0.474 V in the alkaline media.⁵⁰ The Tafel plots of Ni@TPP-CB[6] samples and corresponding electrochemical parameters as well as TOF values for all Ni@TPP-CB[6] systems were presented in Figure S24 and Table S1, respectively.

EIS measurement was also performed for comparing the charge transfer resistance of Ni@TPP-CB[6] systems containing various amounts of Ni. According to the Nyquist plots shown in Figure 5b, these samples only exhibited the

Figure 5. (a) LSV polarization curves for Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] with different Ni content obtained at 10 mV s^{-1} in 0.1 M KOH, and (b) the corresponding Nyquist plots recorded at −0.4 V vs RHE in 0.1 M KOH, (c) chronoamperometry experiments of 12%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] under constant potential of −0.4 V vs RHE in 0.1 M KOH, and (d) the corresponding polarization curves of 12%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] before and after 3 h durability experiment obtained at 10 mV s^{-1} in 0.1 M KOH.

semicircle behavior in the high frequency region. It was found that the R_{ct} value of all systems decreased in the order of 6% Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] > 47%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] > 23% Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] > 12%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6], which is in consistent with the results obtained from LSV studies. The resistance values obtained for these samples were given in Table S2. Overall, 12%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] showed the lowest R_{ct} and best electrocatalytic HER performance among the other systems. The electrochemical behavior of 12%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] can be modeled by a simple Randles equivalent circuit as shown in Figure S25b. The resistance due to uncompensated electrolyte solution is presented by R_s , which is about 46.66 Ω . The diameter of the semicircle arc, R_{ct} value, was calculated to be about 68.60 Ω and this value is quite comparable with those obtained from other reported HER electrocatalysts in the literature.^{43,51} Polarization curve of the 12%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] was manually corrected for iR drop using the R_s from the EIS measurement. As depicted in Figure S25c, the potential window shortened significantly and the current density of 10 mA cm^{-2} could be obtained at a less negative η of −0.513 V vs RHE compared to the uncompensated value of −0.914 V vs RHE.

Durability of electrode is a crucial factor in functionality of HER electrocatalysts. Durability of the 12%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] catalyst was examined using the chronoamperometry (CA) method conducted under constant potential of −0.4 V vs RHE in 0.1 M KOH. The current–time plot in Figure 5c revealed that the current response of the electrocatalyst was almost stable over 6000 s experiment, indicating that the hydrogen production capability of the electrode remained unchanged. Moreover, the LSV polarization curve of the catalyst after 3 h durability experiment was recorded and showed that there was no significant change in the HER performance of the catalyst (Figure 5d).

The morphology and particle size of 12% Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] were characterized by TEM (Figure 6). The TEM

Figure 6. TEM images of 12% Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6].

images illustrate irregular particles with an average length and width around 350 and 250 nm, respectively. 12% Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6]-FTO electrode was characterized SEM, XPS, and XRD techniques before and after 3 h durability experiment (Figure S26–S28). The SEM images showed that the morphology of the sample did not collapse after CA experiments (Figure S26a,c). SEM/EDX elemental mapping results were also indicated similar morphology before and after catalysis (Figure S26b,d). By comparing the high resolution XPS spectra of 12% Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] before and after 3 h CA experiment given in Figure S27a,b, it can be noticed that the electrocatalyst did not undergo any significant change and retained its chemical composition. The Ni 2p XPS spectrum of 12% Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] deconvoluted into eight peaks, which were assigned to the $\text{Ni}^{2+} 2p_{3/2}$, $\text{Ni}^{2+} 2p_{1/2}$, and satellite peaks. The Ni $2p_{3/2}$ XPS spectrum presented an asymmetric doublet peak, with the main peak located at 856.3 eV and a minor peak at 853.3 eV, which can be assigned to $\text{Ni}(\text{OH})_2$ and NiO, respectively, and satellite peaks at 861 and 864 eV.^{52,53} For the Ni $2p_{1/2}$ XPS spectrum, the main peak located at 874 eV, the minor peak at 870.4 eV, and the satellite peaks at 879 and 882.4 eV, respectively. The Zn 2p XPS spectrum showed the same peaks as before the CA experiment and the Zn–N binding (at 397.6 eV) in N 1s spectrum confirmed the presence of Zn in the core of porphyrin rings even after CA experiment.

The amount of H_2 produced can be estimated using the Faraday law (see electrochemical calculations in the SI). Accordingly, 12%Ni@TPP-CB[6] as the optimum catalyst was able to evolve $18.7 \text{ mmol h}^{-1} \text{ g}^{-1}$ hydrogen, contributing to a faradaic efficiency of 85%. In comparison the amounts of produced hydrogen for TPP-CB[6]- TiO_2 and 12%Ni@TPP-CB[6]- TiO_2 were calculated as $7.9 \text{ mmol h}^{-1} \text{ g}^{-1}$ and $11.9 \text{ mmol h}^{-1} \text{ g}^{-1}$, respectively. The amounts of hydrogen produced by all the catalysts studied in this work were plotted in Figure S28.

4. CONCLUSIONS

A new covalent organic framework based on the TPP-Zn-4N₃ and covalently attached CB6(O–P)_n was successfully synthesized through Cu-AAC reaction and then fully characterized. CB6(O–P)_n was synthesized by O-propargylation of the as-synthesized CB6(OH)_n. The presence of CB[6] and electroactive porphyrin cores along with multifunctionalities made the developed COF-TPP-CB[6] a good candidate for electrocatalytic hydrogen evolution from water splitting. The effect of TiO_2 and various loadings of Ni on the electrocatalytic HER performance of COF-TPP-CB[6] in alkaline medium was investigated and it was found that its electrocatalytic activity

showed significant improvement upon introducing only 12% Ni without any TiO_2 . Under optimal conditions, 12%Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] catalyst exhibited high performance and good durability for HER and produced $18.7 \text{ mmol g}^{-1} \text{ h}^{-1}$ of hydrogen (Faradaic efficiency of 85%), which is comparable and even better than other porphyrin-based HER electrocatalysts reported in the literature (Table S3).^{5,9,36,42,54–60}

■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acsaem.0c03265>.

Figures S1–S29, ^1H NMR, ESI–MS, and FT–IR spectra of CB6(OH)_n; ^1H NMR, ESI–MS, and FT–IR spectra of CB6(O–P)_n; ^1H NMR, ESI–MS, FT–IR, and UV–vis absorbance of TPP-4N₃; ^1H NMR, ESI–MS, FT–IR, and UV–vis absorbance of TPP-Zn-4N₃; ^1H NMR spectrum of TPP-CB[6]; TEM image and SEM/EDX spectrum of COF-TPP-CB[6] and the corresponding atomic percentage of elements; XRD spectrum of COF-TPP-CB[6] and the comparison with its monomers; N_2 physisorption isotherm of COF-TPP-CB[6]; multipoint BET, BJH pore size distribution of COF-TPP-CB[6]; TGA graph of COF-TPP-CB[6]; curves related to the determination of the double layer capacitance of 12% Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6]- TiO_2 and 12% Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] catalysts; Tafel plots of Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] catalysts; polarization curve with and without iR correction for 12% Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] and 10%Pt/C; SEM images of 12% Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] before and after CA; XPS data of 12% Ni@TPP-CB[6] before and after CA; XRD spectra of 12% Ni@COF-TPP-CB[6] before and after CA; comparison of the hydrogen produced by studied electrocatalyst in 0.1 M KOH; Tables S1–S3, electrochemical parameters of different studied electrocatalysts toward HER in 0.1 M KOH; resistance values obtained from Nyquist plots for samples with various Ni loading; and a comparison of produced hydrogen and experimental conditions of different porphyrin-based catalysts (PDF)

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Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Mr. S. E. Hadi for his assistance in the TGA.

ABBREVIATIONS USED

NMR, nuclear magnetic resonance
 FT-IR, Fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy
 TGA, thermogravimetric analysis
 SEM, scanning electron microscopy
 TEM, transmission electron microscopy
 EDX, energy dispersive X-ray
 XRD, X-ray diffractometer
 XPS, X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy
 UV-vis, ultraviolet-visible
 ESI-MS, electrospray ionization mass spectrometry
 BET, Brunauer-Emmett-Teller
 Cu-AAC, copper-catalyzed azide-alkyne cycloaddition reaction
 CB[6], cucurbit[6]uril
 CB6(OH)_n, perhydroxy-CB[6]
 CB6(O-P)_n, perpropargyloxy-CB[6]
 TPP-4Br, 5,10,15,20-tetrakis(α -bromo-*p*-tolyl)porphyrin
 TPP-4N₃, 5,10,15,20-tetrakis(α -azido-*p*-tolyl)porphyrin
 TPP-Zn-4N₃, TPP-4N₃ with Zn(II) metalated porphyrin core
 TPP-CB[6], covalently conjugated TPP-Zn-4N₃ with CB6(O-P)_n
 COF, covalent organic framework
 Ni, Nickel
 TiO₂, titanium dioxide
 LSV, linear sweep voltammetry
 CA, chronoamperometry
 HER, hydrogen evolution reaction.

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