Polyamide-MIL-101(Cr) Thin Films Synthesized on Either the Outer or Inner Surfaces of a Polysulfone Hollow Fiber for Water Nanofiltration

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ABSTRACT: High-performance thin film nanocomposite (TFN) hollow fiber (HF) membranes, with MIL-101(Cr) MOF nanoparticles (52 ± 13 nm) embedded, have been synthesized with the polyamide layer formed either on the outer or inner surface of a polysulfone HF (250 and 380 μm ID and OD, respectively). The TFN_out membrane was developed using the conventional interfacial polymerization method, typically applied to obtain TFN flat membranes (MOF particles added to the thin layer by deposition). This membrane gave a water permeance value of 1.0 ± 0.7 L m⁻² h⁻¹ bar⁻¹ and a rejection of 90.9 ± 1.2% of acridine orange (AO, 265 Da). In contrast, the TFN_in membrane was synthesized by microfluidic means and gave a significantly higher water permeance of 2.8 ± 0.2 L m⁻² h⁻¹ bar⁻¹ and a slightly lower rejection of 87.4 ± 2.5% of the same solute. This remarkable increase of flux obtained with small solute AO suggests that the HF membranes developed in this work would exhibit good performance with other typical solutes with higher molecular weight than AO. The differences between the performances of both TFN_in and TFN_out membranes lay on the distinct superficial physicochemical properties of the support, the synthesis method, and the different concentrations of MOF present in the polyamide films of both membranes. The TFN_in is more desirable due to its potential advantages, and more effortless scalability due to the microfluidic continuous synthesis. In addition, the TFN_in membrane needs much fewer quantities of reactants to be synthesized than the TFN_out or the flat membrane version.

KEYWORDS: interfacial polymerization, thin film nanocomposite, hollow fiber, nanofiltration, metal–organic framework, microfluidics

INTRODUCTION

Nanofiltration is a process that aims at separating different mixtures that involve water and organic solvents, as well as ionic solutes and organic molecules with molecular weights between 200 to 1000 g mol⁻¹, by economic and efficient means. Many researchers from several countries have studied and suggested different membrane structures, among which the thin film composite (TFC) and nanocomposite (TFN) membranes are two of the most successful types.¹ The structure of these membranes, which consists of an asymmetric support with a selective thin layer of polyamide (PA) on top, allowed to change the physicochemical properties of each layer separately.² For this reason, many combinations of polymers have been studied,³ several of them available as commercial membranes.

Cadotte et al.⁴ pioneered the synthesis by interfacial polymerization (IP) of the first TFC membrane in 1980, while Jeong et al. prepared the first TFN in 2007.⁵ The latter achieved the combination of a TFC membrane with embedded zeolite nanoparticles (NPs) intending to improve the permeance in reverse osmosis without lowering the salt rejection. In 2013, Sorribas et al.⁶ developed metal–organic framework (MOF)-embedded TFN membranes for organic solvent nanofiltration (OSN) with enhanced separation properties because of the high specific surface areas, narrow porosity, and inorganic–organic character of these nanostructures (MIL-101(Cr), ZIF-8, MIL-53(Al), and NH₂-MIL-53(Al)) for good compatibility with polymers. Later on, several authors studied the effect of other MOF NPs (MIL-68(Al) and ZIF-11,⁷ and UiO-66, ZIF-8, and ZIF-93,⁸ and the simultaneous combination of two complementary MOFs (ZIF-11 and MIL-101(Cr))⁹ in the performance of TFN membranes for OSN.

However, all these researchers used flat sheet membranes. A few authors studied the IP method to yield TFC-hollow fiber (HF) membranes and TFC-tubular membranes because of...
Table 1. Main Advantages and Drawbacks of IP on the Outer or Inner Surface of an HF Asymmetric Support

| surface       | advantages                                                   | drawbacks                                      |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| outer         | similar to flat supports with total access for characterization (e.g., of crystalline NPs in case of TFN membranes) | skin layer unprotected                        |
|               | ease of possible industrial up-scale                          | creation of dead volumes between HFs in a membrane module in operation |
| inner         | use of microfluidics to save reactants and NPs (in the case of TFN membranes) and allow controlled reaction and eventual sequencing for post-treatment | difficult access at small inner diameters giving rise to clogging and limiting the use of agglomerating NPs up-scale can be challenging |
|               | protected skin layer                                          | difficult access for characterization          |
|               | high control of flow and mass transfer for precise synthesis of the selective layer accessible to up-scale since the feed of every HF is wholly isolated from each other | high drop-pressure                              |

Table 2. Synthesis Parameters

| membrane         | description                                      | aqueous phase | organic phase (n-hexane) |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| TFC_out          | PA film on the outer surface                     | C % (w/v) 2 2 | Q (µL·min⁻¹) 0.1 TMC 1   |
| TFC_in           | PA film on the lumen                             | C % (w/v) 2 5 | Q (µL·min⁻¹) 0.3 TMC 1.5 |
| TFN_out          | PA film + MIL-101(Cr) on the outer surface       | C % (w/v) 2 2 | Q (µL·min⁻¹) 0.1 TMC + 0.2 MIL-101(Cr) 1 |
| TFN_in           | PA film + MIL-101(Cr) on the lumen               | C % (w/v) 2 5 | Q (µL·min⁻¹) 0.3 TMC + 0.2 MIL-101(Cr) 1.5 |

*C concentration (MPD in the aqueous phase, TMC in the organic phase, with 0.2% (w/v) of MOF NPs in the case of TFN membrane synthesis); t, time; Q, feed flow. *t, contact time between the aqueous or organic phase and the support.

their higher intensification and productivity, given by the higher membrane area per cubic meter of membrane module they offer as compared to flat membranes. Here, two possibilities came up: the creation of the PA thin film on the outer (TFC_out) surface of the HF or its synthesis on the lumen side (TFC_in). Parthasarathy et al. synthesized a TFC_out, and Liu et al. and Rajaeian et al. further developed optimized versions of this structure using particles of SAPO-34, ETS-4, and TiO₂ to synthesize TFN membranes. In contrast, the first TFC_in was synthesized by Verissimo et al. Continuing this line, some other authors added different types of nanoparticles into the PA thin film (giving rise to TFN_in membranes). Gai et al. for instance, developed a TFN_in membrane combined with Na⁺ carbon quantum dots (NaCQD) using a polyethersulfone (PES) support. Lin et al. synthesized TFN_in membranes including dopamine functionalized HKUST-1 for brackish water filtration supported on a PES HF (0.9 mm ID). Urper-Bayram et al. fabricated a TFN_in membrane combined with TiO₂ NPs using a multiwalled carbon nanotube modified polysulfone as support to filtrate MgSO₄ and NaCl from water. Plisko et al. added fullerol (C₆₀(OH)₂₂–₂₄) to an inner PA thin film as an anti fouling method. Additionally, Ingole et al. and Baig et al. recently prepared TFN membranes for gas dehydration based on MOF NH₂-MIL-125(Ti) and acid-activated bentonite and TiO₂ nanoparticles, respectively. Table 1 summarizes the main advantages and drawbacks of the two approaches presented in this paper (TFC_in/TFN_in and TFC_out/TFN_out HF membranes). In line with these studies, in this work, TFN membranes have been successfully synthesized embedding MIL-101(Cr) NPs either on the outer or on the inner surface of polysulfone HFs. This well-known MOF was chosen because it showed interesting effects in flat TFN membranes for OSN due to its hydrophilic character, wide specific surface area with pore apertures of 1.2 and 1.6 nm, and high crystallinity. The TFN_in and TFN_out HF membranes were compared to their homologous TFC_in and TFC_out membranes to study the consequences of the creation of the thin film on the outer or inner surface of the HF and the impact of the MOF on the structure and separation performance. All membranes synthesized were characterized not only by SEM and TEM but also by chemical detection techniques such as EDX, STEM-EDS, and XPS, so that the presence of crystalline MOF NPs in the samples was fully proved.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

**MOF Particles Synthesis.** MIL-101(Cr) NPs were crystallized following a hydrothermal synthesis procedure: 0.70 g of CrCl₃·6H₂O (≤ 98%, Sigma Aldrich) and 0.45 g of terephthalic acid (98%, Sigma Aldrich) in 26 mL of deionized water. The obtained solution was heated at 180 °C for 30 min in a microwave (Anton Paar, Multiwave 3000). The synthesized nanocrystals were activated as follows: first, they were washed and centrifuged at 10,000 rpm for 15 min with deionized water. Second, the MOF NPs were treated with DMF (99.5%, Scharlau) at 200 °C for 24 h. Finally, they were washed overnight with methanol (99.9%, Scharlau) at 70 °C with two stages of washing and centrifugation at 10,000 rpm for 15 min with methanol.

**HF Supports.** The membrane manufacturer Polymem Fabricant de Membranes kindly supplied the polysulfone (PSf) HF supports. This company designed this type of membrane for microfiltration processes with external pore sizes of about 200 nm. The inner and outer diameters (ID and OD) are 250 and 380 μm, respectively. A membrane module with a volume of 1 m³ built with the filters used in our study would achieve m²·m⁻³·min⁻¹ ratios of ~6900 and ~10,500 when referring to the internal and external HF surfaces, respectively.

**TFC and TFN HF Membrane Synthesis.** The interfacial polymerization (IP) method consists of the reaction between two monomers, m-phenylenediamine (MPD, 99%, Sigma Aldrich) and trimesoyl chloride (TMC, 98%, Sigma Aldrich) in the interface between two immiscible solvents, giving rise to an aromatic polyamide thin film.

For the synthesis of the thin film on the outer surface of the HF, a method recently published was followed. We first immersed a piece of HF 12 cm long in an aqueous solution with a 2% (w/v) of MPD for 2 min. After that, the excess solution was removed with tissue paper.

Then, the HF was immersed in an organic solution composed of 0.1% (w/v) of TMC in n-hexane (extra pure, Scharlau) for 1 min, forming the polyamide. Finally, the rest of the organic solution was removed using fresh n-hexane and that of MPD using deionized water. To
obtain a TFN membrane, the MIL-101(Cr) NPs must be dispersed in the organic solution before the IP occurred. The organic solution would then be composed of 0.1% (w/v) of TMC and 0.2% (w/v) of MIL-101(Cr) NPs (see Table 2). The amount of MIL-101(Cr) NPs was the same as that applied as optimum in the flat TFN membranes developed by Sornibas et al. a few years ago. The TFC or TFN membrane would then be placed in a stainless steel membrane module (see Figure 1A), sealing both ends with an epoxy resin (Araldite). 

IP assisted by microfluidic means was applied to synthesize the PA thin film on the inner surface of a 12 cm long HF support, as we did in a previous research related to TFC and MOF membranes. Using a syringe pump, the MPD solution, whose composition was identical to that used in the previous synthesis (2% w/v), was fed to the fiber inside at a rate of 70 μL/min for 5 min. Pure cyclohexane (Scharlab, extra pure) was then pumped with a different syringe pump at a rate of 157 μL/min for 1 min to remove the excess MPD solution from the lumen side. After that, a solution of 0.3% (w/v) of TMC in n-hexane was pumped with a third syringe pump at a rate of 70 μL/min to start the PA formation. The lumen side was finally washed successively with n-hexane and deionized water. To obtain the TFN membrane, the MIL-101(Cr) NPs must be dispersed in the organic solution at a concentration of 0.2% (w/v). Once the TFC or TFN membranes were obtained, they were mounted on the membrane module shown in Figure 1B, sealing both ends with an epoxy resin (Araldite).

Three samples per membrane type were synthesized, and thus averages and standard deviations of both water permeance and dye rejection values could be calculated.

**Characterization.** The crystallinity of the MIL-101(Cr) NPs was confirmed by X-ray diffraction (XRD) measurements. The results obtained in the experiments were comparable to simulations obtained from ref 23. The measurements were carried out in a D-Max 2500 Rigaku diffractometer with a Cu Kα (λ = 0.15418 nm) rotating mode, from 4 to 40° (2θ) with a 0.025° s⁻¹ step, operated at 40 kV and 80 mA.

Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) was applied to observe the fabricated HF membranes. Different areas in each type of membrane were observed to obtain a qualitative estimation of the MOF NP content. The cross-section area of the TFN_out was analyzed for different components. The EDS was useful to quantify the elements detected, and also the STEM imaging itself can highlight the areas where metals are present because of the contrast differences dependent on the atomic numbers of the different components (heavier elements would appear highlighted in a lighter grey, in contrast to the more blackish lighter elements).

X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) experiments were conducted to quantify the amount of carbon (C), oxygen (O), and nitrogen (N) in the PA thin films of TFN_out membranes. In the case of the TFN_in membrane, the sample was the grid prepared for the TEM and STEM characterization indicated above in order to avoid the signal from the polysulfone support, easier to elude in the TFN_out membrane configuration. The XPS characterization was performed with a Kratos Axis Ultra spectrometer, using a monochromatic Al Kα (1486.6 eV) X-ray source at 10 mA and 15 kV and a power of 150 W. The samples were first air evacuated at room temperature (and at pressures near 10⁻¹¹ bar) and analyzed in 0.7 × 0.3 mm² areas under the same conditions. With the information gathered, the C/N and O/N ratios, which can be related to the cross-linking degree of the PA, were calculated for both TFN membranes. The amount of chromium (Cr) was also measured and applied to estimate the MOF content using the empirical formula of MIL-101(Cr) as previously done in other studies.

Atomic force microscopy (AFM) was applied to measure the roughness on both the outer and inner surfaces of the HF supports. The equipment used was a VEECO Multimode 8 with a tapping mode used in ambient air conditions together with a single crystal silicon antimony-doped cantilever provided by NT-MDT Spectrum Instruments. The method to carry out these measurements on the outer surface was straightforward since the cantilever can have easy

![Figure 1. Membrane modules for permeation from the shell side to the lumen side (A) and from the lumen side to the shell side (B).](image-url)
aqueous solution with acridine orange (AO, 265 Da) as solute (see eqs 1 and 2, respectively) every hour.

**Nanofiltration Experiments.** The modules prepared contained only one fiber each. As the inner and outer diameters of the HFs were 250 and 380 μm, respectively, the modules prepared (8 cm long) with the TFC and TFMN membranes had respective active surfaces of 3.0 × 10⁻⁵ m² in case of filtration from the lumen to the shell side (Figure 1B) and 4.7 × 10⁻⁵ m² in case of filtration from the shell to the lumen (Figure 1A).

A cross-flow filtration installation, whose scheme can be seen in Figure S1, was used for the nanofiltration tests. The feed was an aqueous solution with acridine orange (AO, 265 Da) as solute (20 mg L⁻¹) in a continuous flow configuration at 6 bar and 20 °C. The experiments lasted for 6 h, measuring both permeance and rejection (see eqs 1 and 2, respectively) every hour.

\[
\text{Permeance} = \frac{Q}{\Delta P} = \frac{V}{A \cdot t \cdot \Delta P} = \frac{L}{m^2 \cdot h \cdot \text{bar}}
\]

(1)

\[
\text{Rejection} (\%) = \left(1 - \frac{C_{\text{permeate}}}{C_{\text{feed}}} \right) \times 100
\]

(2)

where Q is the permeate flux, ΔP is the pressure gradient, V is the volume of permeate collected in a given time t, A is the membrane area, different at every membrane side, and \(C_{\text{permeate}}\) and \(C_{\text{feed}}\) are the solute concentration in both permeate and feed. A Jasco V-670 UV−vis spectrophotometer was used, previous calibration, to obtain the AO concentration at 480 nm as the wavelength of maximum absorbance.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**MIL-101(Cr) Characterization.** MIL-101(Cr) crystalline NPs were achieved according to their XRD pattern (see Figure 2A). Additionally, the TGA curve shows the total activation of the MIL-101(Cr) in agreement with the lack of mass losses prior to the degradation temperature (see Figure 2B), except for a 7% lost at the beginning of the curve, probably due to the well-known hydrophilicity of this MOF.

Additionally, the morphology of the NPs observed in the TEM image (see Figure 2C) seems to be similar to those of previous publications and the ED confirmed that they were MIL-101(Cr), as it evidenced the presence of the (066) and (1 11) diffraction planes of the MOF (see Figure 2D). These defractions correspond to d-spacings of 10.5 and 5.7 Å, respectively. The particle size of the MIL-101(Cr) is 52 ± 13 nm, adequate to form a continuous and selective PA film with well-dispersed, embedded MOF NPs.

**Membranes Characterization. SEM and EDX Mapping.** The PSf HF used as support presents morphological differences in superficial pore size and roughness between its outer and inner surfaces. While the pores on the outer surface have diameters of 950 ± 260 nm, those on the inner surface have diameters of 2700 ± 50 nm (see Figure 3A–C). Similarly, the inner surface is rougher than the outer surface (an average roughness of 1000 ± 660 nm compared to 270 ± 50 nm), as it can be seen in the AFM 3D models of Figure 3D,E. Even if the current work is focused on only one type of support, especially suitable due to its commercial application and availability, the influence of the support on the synthesis of TFC membranes has been addressed by several authors from the point of view of porosity and hydrophobicity.

One of the key issues deals with its chemical composition, while for water nanofiltration applications, PSf are suitable, and in the case of organic solvent nanofiltration, solvent-resistant polymers submitted to cross-linking are applied.

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**Figure 2.** Experimental and simulated XRD patterns of MIL-101(Cr) (simulated XRD taken from ref 23) (A); TGA curves of MIL-101(Cr) (B); TEM image of MIL-101(Cr) (C); ED of the same area, with two of the MIL-101(Cr) characteristic crystallographic planes evidenced (066 and 1 11 11) (D).
TFN_out Membrane. Figure 4A shows an overview of the areas observed in the TFN_out membrane where the HF and the epoxy resin (used to prepare the sample) thicknesses are highlighted. Additionally, the areas where the superficial images and the cross-section images were taken are marked in red. The SEM image of the TFN_out membrane depicts three agglomerates of MIL-101(Cr) (highlighted in red circles, see Figure 4B), surrounded by the typical ring-like shapes of the PA thin film. The EDX mapping evidenced the presence of Cr atoms, mainly concentrated in the highlighted areas of Figure 4B (see Figure 4C), and some dispersed red dots in spaces between them, where no NPs are observable with the naked eye. Since the electron beam penetrates several micrometers into the sample during EDX characterization, not all atoms detected are necessarily present at the membrane surface but at different depths. The SEM images of the cross-section corroborate this hypothesis (see Figure 4D): a 1 μm-thick mass, more significant than the 50–100 nm selective thin film. The corresponding EDX mapping (see Figure 4E), where the red dots represent the Cr atoms, confirmed that some of those MOF NPs penetrated into the support.

In conclusion, the presence of MIL-101(Cr) NPs was evidenced in the thin film. Even though some MOF agglomerates were found in the previous images, there are dispersed dots in the EDX mappings evenly distributed along the membrane surface and thickness. Therefore, the MIL-101(Cr) NPs are likely quite well dispersed along the three dimensions of the PA thin film.

TFN_in Membrane. In this case, MIL-101(Cr) NPs or their corresponding aggregates were not sufficiently concentrated to be detected by their chromium content using EDX analysis or SEM images. The SEM micrograph in Figure 5 only shows the same ring-like structures of the PA found in Figure 4B.

TEM, ED, and XPS of Membranes and Detached Films. To prove the presence of crystalline MIL-101(Cr) NPs directly on the PA thin film, the PA with embedded MOF NPs from both TFN_in and TFN_out membranes was analyzed by TEM following the procedure described in the experimental section (removal of the PSf support using DMF as solvent, thereby the isolated PA thin film can be deposited on a TEM copper grid). TEM imaging allowed to observe MIL-101(Cr) NPs wrapped in a grey amorphous mass of PA in both types of PA thin membranes (see Figure 6A,C). This characterization shows that MIL-101(Cr) NPs retained their typical morphology after the IP process, as previously reported.

Figure 4. SEM and EDX characterization of HF membrane TFN_out: cross-section area; this image is a scheme that shows where the SEM images and EDX mappings were obtained (A). SEM image of the surface of the TFN_out membrane with the MOF agglomerates highlighted in red (B). EDX mapping of the surface in (A) with the Cr atoms in red (C). SEM image of the cross-section area (D). EDX mapping of the cross-section area in (D) with the Cr atoms in red (E).

Figure 5. SEM image of the surface on the lumen of the TFN_in membrane.
Moreover, the ED image of the thin film detached from the TFN_out membrane (Figure 6B) shows two diffraction rings that can be indexed as the (066) and (1 11 1) planes (d-spacings of 10.5 and 5.7 Å, respectively) of MIL-101(Cr) NPs. The intensity of those diffraction rings is weak because of the crystal degradation that most MOFs suffer due to their electron beam-sensitive nature and the amorphous PA thin film that covers the MOF NPs. Therefore, it can be assumed that the crystal structure of MOF NPs was maintained after the IP process.

The same results were obtained from the analysis of the PA thin film detached from the TFN_in membrane: the TEM imaging (Figure 6C) allowed to evidence some MIL-101(Cr) nanoparticles dispersed in the PA (grey mass around), and the ED confirmed it (see the ring corresponding to the (1 7 15) diffraction plane in Figure 6D, with a d-spacing of 5.2 Å). Those diffraction rings were observed upon analyzing bare MIL-101(Cr) nanoparticles (see Figure 2D) and they served us to confirm the fact that the MIL-101(Cr) NPs were embedded into the thin films of both membrane types and retained their crystallinity.

Figure 7 shows cross-section TEM images of the TFC membrane and TFN_in membrane with MOF NPs embedded in the PA film (Figure 7A and Figure 7B, respectively). This specific TEM characterization was carried out only on the most relevant TFC_in and TFN_in membranes but not on the TFC_out and TFN_out membranes of the worst nanofiltration performance (see below). TFC and TFN_in thicknesses are heterogeneous in the approximately 55–420 and 125–450 nm ranges, respectively. These thicknesses depend on the PA structure and whether MIL-101(Cr) NPs have been sectioned embedded in the PA film or not. The PA film in this membrane present a pronounced ridge-and-valley structure that have been formed on the inner-surface of the polysulphone HF support, where bigger and more interconnected pores (Figure 3C) and a rougher surface (Figure 3E) are present. This, together with the higher water permeances achieved with the TFN_in membrane as compared to those of the TFN_out one (see below), suggests that the PA film was thicker in the TFN_in membrane than in the TFN_out membrane.

The final characterization technique used to analyze the detached thin films was the STEM imaging combined with EDS. Figure S3A,B evidenced the dispersion of Cr atoms on both samples. Nevertheless, those atoms, known to belong to MIL-101(Cr) NPs, are distributed in located areas, probably occupied by MOF NPs. The EDS spectra that evidenced the presence of Cr on the areas of Figure S3 are available in Figure S4.

**Nano filtration Tests.** Figure 8 shows the performances of all membranes synthesized (during 6 h of experiment), measured in terms of water permeance and AO rejection. AO with a low molecular weight (265 Da) is a suitable molecule to test the separation ability of these membranes, and rejections around 90% will suggest high molecular weight cut-off. It is important to mention that in the first hour of experiment, all membranes showed relatively low AO rejection and high water permeances, along with high standard deviations in both parameters. These values are related to a transitional regime,
where phenomena such as compression and fouling change the surface properties of the membrane. Nevertheless, after the second hour of experiment and onward, both parameters tend to stabilize (steady-state regime) and reach values more commonly found in defect-free nanofiltration membranes. As shown in Figure 8, the water permeance values were higher through the TFC_in membrane than through the TFC_out membrane at any test time (2.2 ± 0.2 and 0.13 ± 0.02 Lm⁻² h⁻¹-bar⁻¹ at 6 h, respectively). These membranes were tested in a previous investigation, obtaining similar permeance values as that predicted in a COMSOL simulation. The research led to the conclusion that the differences between the outer and inner surface morphologies played a critical role in the properties of the PA thin films: the outer PA film permeance is significantly lower than that of the inner. On the contrary, there were a few differences in the rejection values: at 6 h of the filtration experiment, the rejection value obtained by the TFC_in membrane (91 ± 4%) was slightly higher than that obtained by the TFC_out (84 ± 1%) membrane.

When the TFN membrane performances were studied, the differences between the inner and outer composite membranes were maintained at 6 h of operation, favoring the inner configuration membrane: 2.8 ± 0.2 Lm⁻² h⁻¹-bar⁻¹ for the TFN_in membrane and 1.0 ± 0.7 Lm⁻² h⁻¹-bar⁻¹ for the TFN_out. In addition, the behavior of the TFN_in membrane seems to be more predictable than that of the TFN_out membrane in terms of water permeation because its standard deviation is lower. Rejections at the same conditions, once again, were not significantly different (87 ± 3 and 90 ± 1%, for TFN_in and TFN_out, respectively). These, up to ~3 h, are non-steady-state results with the permeances reaching a steady state at 4–6 h. Finally, even if steady state was reached in ~2 h, the results at 2 and 3 h present some fluctuations within the experimental error; as stated in the Figure 8 caption, the error bars were calculated from three different membrane samples, which is proof of the reliability of membrane preparation and nanofiltration testing.

According to previous studies where MIL-101(Cr) was used as filler in TFN membranes, this MOF enhances water permeance due to its specific surface area of approximately 2600 m² g⁻¹, high porosity (pore apertures of 1.2–1.6 nm and cavities of 2.9–3.4 nm), and hydrophilic character. In these studies, the TFN-MIL-101(Cr) flat sheet membrane was 1.2 times more permeable than the TFC flat sheet membrane. Here, with a hollow fiber configuration, membrane TFN_out is around 5.5 times more permeable than its corresponding TFC membrane, as shown in Figure 8. Nevertheless, membrane TFN_in is only around 1.4 times more permeable than its corresponding TFC membrane but approximately 21 times more permeable than the TFC_out membrane. These differences suggest that there is a much lower concentration of MOF in the thin layer synthesized on the lumen of the HF than on the outer HF membrane and on the flat membrane fabricated by Sorribas et al.

The XPS tests confirmed that the TFN_out membrane had a much higher concentration of Cr atoms in its PA thin film than the TFN_in membrane (1.8% compared to 0.2%), as Table 3 shows. In addition, as the ED characterization proved that the Cr content is only related to the presence of MIL-101(Cr) NPs, the higher Cr content, the higher the MOF NP content is (see the estimation of MOF content in the nanocomposite membranes synthesized in Table 3). Unexpectedly, lowering the MIL-101(Cr) content had insignificant consequences on the cross-linking degree of the PA layers: as the Cr concentration increases in the reaction, the cross-linking degree of the PA, represented by the C/N and O/N ratios, barely changes (see Table 3). The O/N ratio is especially interesting to estimate the cross-linking degree because it is possible to calculate the proportion of MPD-TMC pairs of the PA that are cross-linked using that ratio. From this calculation, it can be concluded that a fully cross-linked PA corresponds to an O/N ratio equal to 1, while a fully linear PA has an O/N ratio of 2. Having O/N ratios above 2, as shown in Table 3, would mean that the PA is barely cross-linked. Moreover, the O/N ratio could have been increased due to the presence of MIL-101(Cr) with oxygen in its composition, in agreement with is empirical formula [Cr₂(O)(OH)-

| Table 3. C/N and O/N Ratios, Cr Atomic Content, and Estimated MOF Content in %mol of the Two Different Nanocomposite Membranes Synthesized |
|-----------------|--------|-----|------|---------|
| membrane        | C/N    | O/N | Cr (% atomic) | MOF (% mol) |
| TFN_in          | 10.2   | 2.8 | 0.2            | 0.07       |
| TFN_out         | 10.7   | 3.0 | 1.8            | 0.7       |

Comparison between Different Synthesis Methods. The synthesis process of the TFN_out membranes is similar to that applied to the flat membranes carried out elsewhere: IP in a static bath. This method led to a higher amount of MOF NPs in the PA films since they end up embedded in the polymer by

https://dx.doi.org/10.1021/acsami.6b15171
ACS Appl. Mater. Interfaces 2021, 13, 7773–7783
bare precipitation (even relatively big agglomerates as it was reported in previous researches). However, several authors have widely evidenced that the substrate used for the IP has a powerful effect on the thin film characteristics. In this way, as Figure 8 shows, the TFC and TFN-MIL-101(Cr) flat membranes had relatively low performances in terms of solvent permeance (0.5 and 0.6 L·m⁻²·h⁻¹·bar⁻¹, respectively), although the highest in terms of rejection (>99%). TFN_out membranes were around twice more permeable than TFN flat membranes, and both TFC_in and TFN_in membranes were far more permeable than the two previous configurations. These differences do not fully lay on the MOF NP content since the support used for the flat membranes was an ultrafiltration tailor-made P84 support, the solvent filtrated was methanol, and the solute was a mixture of styrene oligomers with different molecular masses in the range of NF. However, it can give an idea of the meaning of having a TFC HF membrane as the TFN_in that separates water and a solute of 265 Da at 2.8 ± 0.2 L·m⁻²·h⁻¹·bar⁻¹ with a rejection of 87.5% with no post-treatment or activation method needed.

The application of hollow fibers as supports also allows using less quantity of reactants and solvents to synthesize TFC and TFN membranes (see Figure 9A and Figure 9B). According to the calculations per m² of the membrane surface, the TFN_in membrane would be the cheapest and most cost-effective membrane to be fabricated, thanks to the microfluidic regime. Far more expensive are the TFN flat membrane and the TFN_out membrane, even though the methods to fabricate either of them are potentially optimizable, as it has been the case for the flat configuration. However, the main advantage of the TFN_in membrane synthesis method is that it is easily scalable because of the highly controllable nature of the low-diameter hollow fibers (overall those in the microfluidic region, with diameters below 500 μm, as the hollow fiber supports used in this current work) and that a small quantity of MOF in the thin film can significantly enhance its performance.

Knowing the potential of the PSf HF used as a support for this investigation in terms of the m²·m⁻³ ratio (6900 m²·m⁻³), a TFN MIL-101(Cr) membrane with the thin film synthesized on the inner layer would be more productive than the corresponding TFN flat and TFN_out membranes. The first could offer a lower m²·m⁻³ ratio, while the latter has the...
second lowest permeance of all membranes considered here (see Figure 10).

![Figure 10. Performance of a TFC flat membrane and TFN MIL-101(Cr) flat membranes (both with methanol as solvent, styrene oligomers as solutes, and P84 as support) compared to the performances of the TFC_out and TFN_out membranes and TFC_in and TFN_in membranes (water as solvent, AO as solute, and PSf as support).](image)

CONCLUSIONS

The STEM, TEM imaging, EDX, and XPS tests showed that both TFN_in and TFN_out membranes had MIL-101(Cr) NPs embedded in their thin films. However, the IP method used for the TFN_out membrane fabrication allowed to embed more MIL-101(Cr) NPs in its thin film, as the nanofiltration tests evidenced. In consequence, there was a bigger improvement in the water permeance when adding MIL-101(Cr) to the outer thin film than the inner thin film, compared to their corresponding TFC membranes. However, the most permeable membrane was the TFN_in membrane. The reason behind the better performance of the TFN_in membrane may be the roughness and superficial pore sizes of the lumen side of the hollow fiber support.

Interestingly, the TFN_in membrane was even more permeable than its flat membrane version, even though that one shows higher solute rejections. However, rejections were obtained with small molecular weight (265 Da) AO dye, what suggests that the HF membranes would exhibit good performance with other typical solutes with higher molecular weight than AO, while favoring of the intrinsic high water permeance developed here as compared to flat membranes. Besides, the microfluidic regime, present in the fabrication of the composite thin film on the lumen of the hollow fiber, allowed to use much less quantities of reactants and solvents, together with a more gently controlled washing, than the flat membrane or the TFN_out membrane synthesis. The minor use of MOF is particularly attributed to the fact that the laminar flow allows a better reaction control of the interfacial polymerization. In consequence, the TFN_in, with a MOF content approximately ten times lower than that of the TFN_out, achieves a similar degree of crosslinking, which provides a high solute rejection, together with a clear increase in water permeance, which can be attributed to a more even dispersion of MOF nanoparticles. In this way, the MOF is more efficiently applied in TFN_in than in TFN_out membrane, probably producing a less thick polyamide membrane. Finally, even if some TFC or TFN flat membranes in the literature could offer better permeance-rejection binomial than the membranes developed here, the MIL-101(Cr) based TFN membrane has the advantage of being fabricated on a commercial hollow fiber substrate with higher surface to volume (ca. 6900 m⁻²) ratio than flat membranes. This would make possible the fabrication of membrane modules with high water flux per m² of equipment.

ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acsami.0c21571.

Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Financial support from the Research Projects MAT2016-77290-R (AEI/FEDER, UE) and PID2019-104009RB-I00/AEI/10.13039/501100011033, the Aragon Government (T43-20R), and the ESF are gratefully acknowledged. C.E.-G. thanks the Aragon Government for his PhD grant. The authors acknowledge the LMA and Servicios de Apoyo a la Investigación (SAL, Universidad de Zaragoza) for offering access to their instruments and expertise. We also acknowledge Polymem Membrane Manufacturer for the HF supports.

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