

Summary report on the

First meeting of the global Islamic Advisory Group on Polio Eradication

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Jeddah, Saudi Arabia
26–27 February 2014



**World Health
Organization**

Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

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1. Introduction

The first meeting of the global Islamic Advisory Group on Poliovirus Eradication (IAG) was held at the headquarters of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on 26–27 February 2014. The meeting was organized by Al Azhar Al Sharif and the International Islamic Fiqh Academy (IIFA) in collaboration with OIC, Islamic Development Bank, WHO and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

The meeting was chaired by Sheikh Dr Saleh Bin Abdullah Bin Humaid, Imam and Khateeb of the Holy Mosque in Makkah Al Mukarramah, President of the IIFA Council.

The inaugural session was addressed by a number of distinguished speakers. Sheikh Dr Saleh Bin Abdullah Bin Humaid, President of IIFA Council, expressed his strong support for polio vaccination and observed that Islamic religious code (sharia) fully supported all things beneficial to humankind. As such, polio vaccination was fully supported by Islam. He highlighted the multiple rulings and statements issued by IIFA in support of polio eradication. He underscored the readiness of the IIFA to support polio eradication in the Islamic world.

Dr Abbas Abdallah Shouman, Vice President Al Azhar Al Sharif, stated that preventive health measures in Islam were approved by sharia as a matter of duty. He referred to the Islamic injunctions (fatwas) issued by Al Azhar scholars fully supporting polio vaccination. He denounced the so-called fatwas by non-experts, lacking proper knowledge of the issue. He condemned attacks on health workers as a major sin and expressed strong support for the organizations undertaking health activities

Dr Ahmed Mohamed Ali Al Madani, President of Islamic Development Bank, recalled that Third Extraordinary Islamic Summit Conference held in Makkah in 2005 had placed special emphasis on disease prevention and control and the support of the Islamic Development Bank for polio eradication was a step towards the implementation of the OIC Ten Year Programme of Action adopted by the Extraordinary Summit. In this context, he noted the Bank's financial support of US\$ 227 million for polio eradication in Pakistan. Dr Al Madani reaffirmed the Bank's commitment to cooperate with international partners including WHO in the fight against diseases and epidemics. He also announced that the Islamic Development Bank would organize an international conference of Islamic scholars on polio eradication in Pakistan in collaboration with the Islamic Advisory Group and a national advisory group.

Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, highlighted the success of polio vaccination efforts, which had resulted in the reduction of incidence of the disease by more than 99%. He referred to WHO's close collaboration with Muslim scholars on polio eradication and expressed hope that the IAG's work would further strengthen global polio eradication efforts.

Dr Iyad Ameen Madani, Secretary General of the OIC, observed that the IAG meeting was about the future of the children in the Muslim world and their fundamental right to live a healthy life without disabilities. While referring to cooperation between OIC and international partners for polio eradication, he expressed his desire to further strengthen such collaboration in relation to other health challenges and invited WHO to work with the General Secretariat in the implementation of the OIC Strategic Health Programme of Action (2014–2023).

2. Summary of discussions

To set the scene, several speakers provided detailed briefings on the mandate of the IAG and on the polio situation in Pakistan and in Somalia.

Dr Yagoub Al Mazrou, Secretary-General Health Services Council, Saudi Arabia and a member of IAG, made a presentation outlining the status of polio in the Islamic world, challenges in polio eradication efforts and role and functions of the IAG and its Executive Committee. He stressed the need for strong and visible ownership of polio eradication by the Islamic community and the need for all religious, political and medical institutions to join hands to support the three polio endemic countries in the OIC to surmount the existing challenge by using their comparative advantages.

Ms Ayesha Raza Farooq, Prime Minister's Focal Person for Polio Eradication in Pakistan, presented to the IAG the status of polio in Pakistan and the efforts and resources put in by the government for its eradication. She informed the IAG of the Government of Pakistan's full commitment to polio eradication and the personal oversight by the Prime Minister and President of Pakistan of the biggest national health initiative that has ever been undertaken. She recounted the challenges facing polio eradication in Pakistan, in particular the prohibition on polio vaccination by certain elements in Waziristan and Bara region in Khyber Agency. The polio eradication campaign in Pakistan received a great setback due to intelligence-gathering activities conducted under the cover of health services. In 2014, polio has been limited to the conflict-affected Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) region, and Ms Farooq sought the assistance of the IAG in addressing

misconceptions about polio vaccination. She reiterated the request of Pakistan for a visit by the Imam of Haramain Al Sharifain to Pakistan.

Dr Ridwan Hersi Mohamed, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Religious Affairs of Somalia, briefed the meeting about polio outbreak in Somalia and the challenges to polio immunizations in the country which included conflict, lack of health services infrastructure, and a prohibition announced on polio vaccination by extremist groups. The Somali Minister underscored the need for international assistance to Somalia and highlighted the relevance of IAG in addressing misleading information about bans on polio vaccination.

Discussions among the IAG members focused on the role, functions and structure of the IAG, challenges facing polio eradication in the polio endemic countries and the ways to assist national polio eradication efforts.

It was observed that the challenges to polio eradication were not mainly religious. There was general agreement at various levels of the societies regarding the benefits of vaccination. However, certain groups were resisting polio vaccination for political bargaining.

With reference to the concerns linking the Abbottabad events to the United Nations, the Regional Director reiterated that WHO had taken a clear stand in a statement denouncing the politicization of health interventions. While it is important for the politicians and concerned authorities to make concerted efforts to address the political and socio-cultural dimensions of the problem, the IAG is unequivocal about its support for polio vaccination based on Islamic rulings and condemning the unjustified pronouncements against polio vaccination and attacks on polio health workers misusing the name of religion.

Several IAG members underlined the need for mobilizing students in the high-risk areas to support polio vaccination in their communities. Institutions like Al Azhar University in Cairo, International Islamic University in Islamabad and other religious institutions are urged to play a stronger role in providing messages to the communities through their students. Special orientation sessions for the students should be organized in this regard. The need for training of local religious and community leaders, polio vaccinators and effective dissemination of fatwa in favour of polio vaccination was also highlighted. A representative of the Pakistan ulema (Moulana Muhammad Hanif Jallandhari) highlighted the importance of an international conference of Islamic scholars to confront those resistant to vaccination and affirm an unequivocal Islamic stance on the issue.

In the context of public outreach, the role of community physicians was also recognized. The IAG members were briefed about the activities of the Federation of Islamic Medical Association (FIMA) and the contribution it has been making for polio eradication through its network of physicians spread across 47 states.

3. Next steps

- The IAG members approved the terms of reference for the Group by consensus.
- The IAG members issued the Jeddah Declaration and requested the Executive Committee of the IAG to review and finalize the proposal for a six-month plan of action for its activities that would support polio affected countries to address challenges, and would be implemented in collaboration and coordination with the concerned governments and parties.



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