



Address by

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WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

to the

**CONSULTATION ON CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT FOR RELIGIOUS
STUDENTS ON POLIO ERADICATION, IMMUNIZATION AND MOTHER AND
CHILD HEALTH**

Cairo, 7 March 2017

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to join you today in the Technical Advisory Committee Consultation on Curriculum Development for Religious Students on Polio Eradication, Immunization and Mother and Child Health. I am thankful to His Excellency Professor Dr Ahmed Hosny, Rector of Al Azhar University, Professor Dr Gamal Serour, Director of International Islamic Center for Population Studies and Research (IICSPR) of Al Azhar AlSharif, and professors and authors from IICPSR for their presence and support. I also welcome WHO and UNICEF colleagues from headquarters, the Regional Office and from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Somalia.

I take this opportunity to extend my thanks and great appreciation to His Excellency Dr Ahmed El-Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Al Sharif, for his support to the Islamic Advisory Group (IAG) since its establishment. My sincere thanks also go to all the IAG members for their guidance and support, which have led to the success of this unique initiative.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are very proud of this Islamic consortium dedicated to supporting the crucial objective of ending polio, and we are delighted to be able to support its mission. Needless to say, it is an absolute in Islam to preserve the well-being and physical health of all children. The IAG strongly advocates for and has repeatedly confirmed this, exhorting Muslim parents and influencers to encourage and ensure the immunization of all children.

We stand at a historic crossroads. Wild poliovirus transmission is at the lowest levels in history. In 2017 to date, Afghanistan has reported only two cases, and Pakistan has reported only one. Humankind is very close to eradicating from the face of the earth a disabling and killer disease – poliomyelitis. Unfortunately two of the last endemic countries are Afghanistan and Pakistan, both of which are members of the Region and of the Muslim world.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Upon assuming my responsibilities as Regional Director, I have interacted with a range of leaders and scholars on important health issues in the Region. I am also planning a meeting with His Excellency Dr Saleh bin Humaid, President of the International Islamic Fiqh Academy and Imam Alharam Almakki, Dr Bandar Haggar, President of the Islamic Development Bank and Dr Yousuf Bin Ahmed Al Othaimen, Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation during my next visit to Jeddah. The IAG and national IAGs have made a tremendous contribution to health at the national, provincial and community level by engaging the local religious scholars in providing support and protection to the front-line health workers. All these activities have shown positive results in addressing misinformation and reducing vaccination refusals. As a result, access and vaccination status have improved.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am thankful to you all for the hard work which has been accomplished in this Consultation. I am pleased to note the progress of the religious students training programme of the IAG. Indeed, these religious students, in addition to their understanding of the teachings of Islam, will be equipped with a good comprehension of priority health issues of underserved communities, in order to help bring about change in improving health status, particularly in areas where health infrastructures are relatively weak. I am also pleased to note that Al Azhar is taking the lead in training their students coming from the priority countries of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Somalia. This will be followed by establishing a network with Sharia faculties of national universities. Plans to approach the International Islamic University in Uganda, where students from nearly 20 African countries are studying, are commendable.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We look forward to the Group stepping up its efforts with all polio partners – global and national – to achieve the pressing goals it was created for, and also to support the Sustainable Development Goals through the improvement of maternal and child health and immunizations. We will be failing in our duty if we do not ensure that all mothers and children are protected from preventable diseases. We need to send a strong message of hope to the families at risk and also a strong message to those who are impeding the basic right of mothers and children to health and life.

WHO stands prepared to provide technical guidance and support. We look forward to ever stronger collaboration with member organizations of the IAG for the paramount purpose of tackling the challenges and obstacles that stand in the way. We need your wisdom to guide us all through these challenging times. We look forward to your advice on the way forward, and will spare no effort in assisting and supporting the implementation of decisions you have taken today, and in the future.

I thank you once again and wish you every success.