



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Address by

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To the

**SECOND ISLAMIC ADVISORY GROUP FOR POLIO ERADICATION (IAG)
MEETING**

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Your Excellencies,

It gives me great pleasure to participate in this second meeting of the Islamic Advisory Group for Polio Eradication (IAG). We are most grateful to Al Azhar Al Sharif for hosting us all today, and I would like to thank the Grand Imam Sheikh Ahmed El Tayeb, both for his kind acceptance of Al Azhar's chairing of this important meeting and for his indispensable support to the group and its vital mission. I am also thankful to representatives of the other core member organizations of IAG– the International Islamic Fiqh Academy (IIFA), the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) –for their valuable presence and support. Let me thank also the other distinguished members of the IAG for their participation.

We cannot emphasize enough how significant the creation of the IAG, under the leadership of Al Azhar and the International Islamic Fiqh Academy, is for polio eradication efforts in the Muslim world. And it is particularly significant for the three polio-endemic countries remaining on our small planet today and for those countries that continue to be at high risk. Despite some lingering and haunting challenges to the goal of eradication, we are still very close to the long-awaited finish line in our race against this dreadful disease, and to reaching the target that was set by the international community as a global goal in 1988. Needless to say, Islam strongly advocates the preservation and protection of children's health and well-being. Countless prominent Islamic scholars, including those gathered under the IAG banner, have repeatedly confirmed this and have exhorted Muslim parents and influencers to encourage and ensure the immunization of all children.

For many years, we at the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean of the World Health Organization(WHO) have been keen, and fortunate, to join hands with Islamic scholars in the service of public health goals and causes. Today, in the second year of IAG's existence, we are very pleased to see this Islamic consortium so dedicated to supporting the crucial objective of ending polio transmission, and to be able to support its mission.

In 1988, the world community resolved to wipe polio off the disease map at a time when it was crippling hundreds of thousands of children around the world every year. Now, following a prolonged fight, we are almost there, having achieved 99.9 percent of our target, and having seen nearly every country in the world taken off the polio map. However, the ferocious poliovirus continues to circulate in some communities, in spite of unrelenting vaccination drives and dedicated eradication programmes, and therefore continues to be a threat to countries from which it has been eradicated. There are several compelling factors involved in this dynamic that I will shortly touch upon.

It was the fact that the polio epidemic has, in the last few years, been peculiar to certain areas of Muslim countries that led to the establishing of this advisory group. The IAG was created to reinforce the Muslim world's political commitment to eradicating polio, to motivate donors to help close the funding gaps, and to encourage affected countries and communities to take the extra steps needed to reach every child with the vaccine. After one year of activities, 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 to make a real difference in the lives of those remaining vulnerable children.

Through many field visits, high-level discussions and special meetings in affected countries of our region and elsewhere, I have made every effort to shine a spotlight on the intricate sociocultural and political setting that continues to block polio eradication. This vital goal faces multiple challenges, ranging from deadly attacks on polio workers and inaccessibility of children in need, due to ongoing conflict and politicization of the polio programme, to misconceptions and disinformation about immunization. In January, the Executive Board of WHO was told that polio eradication is a major global public health objective that is now repeatedly compromised by instability and civil unrest. The frequent atrocities committed against polio workers and their guards, which IAG rightly condemned in a formal statement last year, are a glaring case in point that must come to an end. We need to join forces, mobilize sufficient energy and resources, and be genuinely innovative in our approach if we are to make meaningful headway.

There are a few glimmers of hope amid the gloom. In January we marked a year since the last case of polio was reported in Syria, thanks to an extensive outbreak response led by WHO. We were recently able to announce that a 12-month emergency immunization response across the Middle East appears to have brought to an end a polio outbreak that began in Syria and Iraq in 2013. More than nine months has passed since the most recent case of wild poliovirus was confirmed in Africa. All the polio cases reported in 2015 are from just two Member States of the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region – Pakistan, 21 cases and Afghanistan, 1 case.

This second meeting of the IAG convenes at an important juncture in the battle against polio. Your agenda aims to endorse a strategy and an action plan containing a number of activities and engagements that promise to be very effective. The collective endeavours will be led and guided by the distinguished religious scholars and mentors assembled in the IAG. The actions envisaged are expected to be instrumental in providing crucial solidarity with affected Muslim communities, supporting global polio eradication, reconfirming the compatibility of immunization with Islamic sharia and teachings, and exposing the false ideology of those obstructing eradication. Your deeds and words are essential, to galvanize Islamic scholars, as well as political and traditional tribal and community leaders, to act against mistaken beliefs, disinformation and misinterpretations regarding vaccines and immunization.

Islam explicitly commands believers to protect all children against disease and debility, including this crippling disease. We therefore expect this distinguished gathering of credible voices of Islam to restore hope to the communities and families who have been denied protection for their children, and to challenge the detractors whose actions undermine the protection of their health and well-being.

As I told this eminent group last year, this is your meeting. WHO stands prepared, and will be privileged, to extend a helping hand in terms of technical guidance and support. I trust you will continue to make the IAG a relevant actor in the global effort to eradicate polio and protect all our children. We are very keen to maintain and further enhance our partnership with member organizations of the IAG for the paramount purpose of tackling the challenges and obstacles that stand in the way of polio eradication. Thus, we will spare no effort in assisting and supporting the implementation of decisions you will take today, and in the future.

I thank you and wish you a very successful meeting.