

THE ISLAMIC ADVISORY GROUP

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER, ISSUE 8, JUNE 2018



How a vaccine refuser in Pakistan now advocates for polio eradication



PSTF member Molvi Hameedullah Hameedi vaccinating a child in Killa Abdullah, Baluchistan, whose parents used to refuse vaccination. Photo: 2018/D. Khan

For most of his life Molvi Hameedullah Hameedi did not believe in the safety and effectiveness of the oral polio vaccine. As a prominent religious scholar in a mountainous rural area of Killa Abdullah he rejected vaccinations like other religious scholars in his circle.

"After reading anti-vaccine books and papers, I began following the work of anti-vaccine campaigners," he says. "Soon, I came to consider it my religious duty to spread awareness against the polio vaccine."

But today he is a determined supporter of routine vaccination for all children.

"It all changed when I was invited to a two-day International Ulama conference in Islamabad where religious scholars from all over Pakistan and other Islamic countries were invited to debate polio vaccination." The conference was hosted by the Islamic Advisory Group (IAG). For Molvi Hameedullah, it was a revelatory moment. "Through talking to these people, I was getting a completely different picture to what I had believed earlier."

By educating religious leaders and scholars about the poliovirus, and explaining religious justifications for vaccine acceptance, the IAG and its national affiliate (NIAG) equips people like Molvi Hameedullah with the tools to act as health advocates, both during and outside of polio vaccination campaigns. The same skills that help scholars engage with parents about the polio vaccine are applicable to wider maternal and child health issues.

Today, Molvi Hameedullah is a member of the Provincial Scholar Task Force (PSTF) under the NIAG. Of his new role Molvi Hameedullah says, "All my doubts vanished, but I was faced with a different problem. I had been working against polio vaccination for many years and now felt that I had done great damage to the children and parents of my community. I felt it was now my absolute religious duty to negate all that I had taught before. I decided to step forth, and started working in the community voluntarily to promote vaccination."

Since he joined the PSTF religious refusals in Molvi Hameedullah's area have declined. There have also been no cases of polio in the area of the district since that time.

Mobile religious teams help convert Afghanistan's polio refusals

Mobile religious teams have successfully convinced religious scholars at 137 *madrasas* in Kandahar of the importance of vaccinating children against polio after having rejected immunization. Afghanistan's mobile religious and community affairs teams work in high risk areas suffering from a high number of refusals with the goal of helping families make positive and informed decisions about polio vaccination. Initially there was one team in Kandahar city making frequent visits to high-risk districts of the province. Because of the success of that team the programme was expanded to three teams in April 2018 with one focusing on Spin Boldak, once one of the highest risk districts.

During the last three months the teams have been travelling to all the high-risk areas and have tailored their monthly activities to visit all refusal families. During the month of



A team of Mullahs (religious elders) talking to parent to convince him to vaccinate his children in Loya Wala area of Kandahar city. (Photo: UNICEF/2018/Sayed Kamal Shah)

May they visited 532 families where 643 children were vaccinated. They also met with 33 mullahs and held 36 community meetings to dispel religious misperceptions about polio eradication and its campaigns.

A number of prominent mullahs are supporting this programme, including Molvi Abdul Rashid, and Molvi Abdul Hanan Hemat, a prominent religious elder who is a preacher of the main mosque in Spin Boldak.

Islamic Development Bank renewing its support for the IAG



Dr Bandar Hajjar, President of the Islamic Development Bank and one of the core members of the Islamic Advisory Group

Dr Bandar Hajjar, the President of the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) received Dr Yagoub Al Mazrou, the chairman of the

executive committee of the IAG, on 6 May to discuss future support for the group.

Dr Al Mazrou thanked the bank president for his ongoing support for the IAG both technically and financially. He also extended an invitation to Dr Hajjar to participate in the fifth annual IAG meeting. The meeting is set to take place on 14 November in Jeddah at the headquarters of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), another core IAG member organization where its Secretary General, Dr Yousef Al-Othaimen will host the event.

On his part the president expressed his appreciation to the role played by the IAG in raising awareness and dispelling rumours about the polio vaccine and in supporting polio

eradication efforts within the Muslim world. He also showed renewed support for the IAG's expanded mandate into other maternal and child health initiatives, including routine immunization and expressed his readiness to expand the support of the bank to the IAG in these areas. He accepted the invitation to the fifth annual IAG meeting.

The meeting was also attended by Dr Bashier Sallam, the focal point of the IsDB to the IAG; Dr Abdulqahir Qamar, the focal point of the International Islamic Fiqh Academy (IIFA) to the IAG; and Mr Abdulnur Sekindi, the focal point of the OIC to the IAG.

About the IAG

The Islamic Advisory Group (IAG) was launched in 2013 after consultations between Al Azhar Al Sharif, the International Islamic Fiqh Academy (IIFA), the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) who make up the core membership of the group along with other religious scholars, technical experts and academics. It aims to muster support from Muslim religious scholars and groups, donor countries, and organizations for the global effort to end polio in the high-risk areas of priority countries (Afghanistan, Pakistan and Somalia).

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Polio update

Thirteen wild polio cases of type 1 have been reported so far in 2018:

- 10 in Afghanistan
- 3 in Pakistan.

Efforts are ongoing through the implementation of national emergency action plans in both countries to address remaining gaps in coverage and surveillance, and in close coordination with each other.

Al Azhar University completes student training workshops for current academic year



Al Azhar University in Cairo has completed 11 workshops from February through April training international students on polio eradication, routine immunization and maternal and priority child health issues from both the health and religious perspectives. The university's International Islamic

Center for Population Studies and Research trained third and fourth year students from the polio-endemic and at-risk countries of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and Nigeria studying in the Shariah and Arabic studies programmes of the university.

Once they return back home the students can be called upon by the IAG to join its network of religious scholars and community-based volunteers dispelling rumours and misperceptions about the polio vaccine among parents and other community members.