

THE ISLAMIC ADVISORY GROUP

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Religious leader building community trust to end polio in Pakistan



Imam Qari Mehboob laughs with local children as he checks their finger marking to make sure that they are vaccinated. Photo credit: WHO Pakistan/Dawood Batozai

Iman Qari Mehboob is 50 years old, a migrant from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa like most of his neighbours. He calls the community to prayer five times a day, and teaches many of the youngest children in the town of Gulshan-e-Buner in the eastern corner of Karachi. The town includes some of the most impoverished and high-risk populations of the city.

A father of four children, he is devoted to keeping them and all the other children in his community safe from the poliovirus. His support of the polio eradication programme has helped increase trust, boost uptake of routine

immunization services and spark conversations about the vaccine.

During every polio vaccination campaign, Mehboob goes from house to house with vaccination teams to check for any unvaccinated children. He speaks to parents who refuse the vaccine for their child, reassuring them that it is safe and effective. He conducts his work under the guidance of the National Islamic Advisory Group for Polio Eradication (NIAG), which educates religious leaders about polio eradication and the unique and important role they can play in protecting all Pakistan's children from

polio. Under the guidance of NIAG, religious leaders are trained on the basics of social mobilization, communication, health and hygiene. They also learn about the religious justifications for polio vaccination, including examining the arguments and fatwas of influential religious scholars.

Reflecting on his training, Mehboob says, "The toughest job [for the NIAG trainers] is to convince religious clerics because their denial and doubt is deep rooted, but the collective *Fatwa* [scholarly verdict] of prominent scholars helps a lot". Since his training, Mehboob has organized community engagement sessions to raise awareness about the dangers of the poliovirus. He often makes vaccination a central theme during his sermons at Friday and Eid prayers. "I face less resistance because most of the people here know me personally and they rely on me because of my status as a religious cleric," he says.

Since he joined the programme, vaccine refusals in Gulshan-e-Buner have dropped by 50%, and far more children receive their full polio vaccine doses on time. Gulshan-e-Buner is one of the high-risk areas of Karachi where the polio programme first began community-based vaccination.

Student training workshops begin at the Islamic University in Uganda

The first student training workshop at the Islamic University in Uganda (IUIU) was held on 6–7 September 2018. Twenty five students from the faculties of Islamic Studies and Nursing attended the workshop at the main campus in Mbale to learn about polio eradication, routine immunization and maternal and child health issues. Once graduated, the students who come from Nigeria, Rwanda, Somalia and Uganda will be able to return back to their home towns and teach their local communities about these priority health issues and support health workers to dispel rumours and religious misperceptions about the polio vaccine.

Ahead of the workshop a training of trainers (TOT) was held at the university campus in Kampala on 21–25 July where 10 faculty members from the departments of Islamic Law, Medicine and Nursing learned about training methodology and the student



IUIU faculty members receive the training of trainers ahead of the student training workshops.

training materials. Four of these professors (two from the faculty of Islamic Law and two from the faculty of Nursing) later went on to lead the first student training workshop in September. Two more workshops are planned for this calendar year.

The student training programme and manual were developed at Al Azhar University in Egypt where 15 student training workshops have been held so far. A professor of Curriculum and Instruction from the university led the TOT workshop at the IUIU.

Grand Imam of Al Azhar Al Sharif receives WHO Regional Director



Dr Ahmed El-Tayyeb (right) received Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari at *Mashyakhit Al Azhar*.

The Grand Imam of Al Azhar Al Sharif and IAG member, Dr Ahmed El-Tayyeb, received the World Health Organization's Regional Director for the Eastern

Mediterranean, Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, at *Mashyakhit Al Azhar*, the headquarters of Al Azhar Al Sharif, on 24 September. Dr Al-Mandhari thanked the Grand Imam for

his efforts supporting health initiatives, including polio eradication and stressed the important role played by religious scholars in helping to rectify religious misperceptions among the general public. He pointed out that both Al Azhar Al Sharif and the International Islamic Fiqh Academy act as important references to health professionals in the region. He also requested Al Azhar's support in raising public awareness about the harmful effects of smoking.

Dr El-Tayyeb thanked Dr Al-Mandhari and called upon WHO and other international organizations to focus their efforts on helping the poor, particularly those young people who are struggling to establish new families. Dr Maha El-Adawy, Director

of the Division of Health Protection and Promotion at the Regional Office, assured the Grand Imam of WHO's commitment to maternal and child health initiatives as part of maintaining the health and vitality of the family unit across the Region.

Mr Tamer El-Maghraby, communication consultant for the IAG, extended the invitation of the Secretary General of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to the Grand Imam for his participation in the Fifth Annual IAG Meeting to be held in Jeddah on 14 November. He also briefed him on efforts of the executive committee in preparing IAG's work plan for 2019 with input from all partners, including Al Azhar.

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).

IAG secretariat

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Polio update

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

- 15 in Afghanistan
- 4 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.

IAG supports measles vaccination in Indonesia



The chairman of IAG's executive committee issued a letter of support to the measles and rubella vaccination campaign that took place in Indonesia in response to rumours that taking the vaccine was *haram* (religiously prohibited). "The protection of life and progeny is one of the *maqasid al-Shariah* (the ultimate objectives of Islamic law)," wrote Dr Yagoub Al-Mazrou. "Allah, the exalted, indicated that failure to protect children is prohibited."

The letter went on to say: "The Islamic Advisory Group is very much concerned about the issue of families refusing vaccination for measles and rubella during the current campaign in Indonesia, and calls upon all Religious Leaders to strongly support the campaign to protect children from completely preventable diseases, and to advise parents to fulfil their responsibility to ensure vaccination and protection of their children."

Close to 32 million children across 28 provinces were vaccinated between August and September, including in some of the most difficult and hard-to-reach areas of the country. The circulation of such rumours lead to parental refusal to vaccinate children which puts their health at risk.