

Summary report on the

Consultation with Islamic scholars on polio eradication

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1. Introduction

A consultation with Islamic scholars on polio eradication was held in Cairo, Egypt on 6–7 March, 2013, with the participation of Islamic scholars and Muslim intellectuals from different countries. The objective of the consultation was for Islamic religious and technical leaders from countries of the region to brainstorm the best strategies to demonstrate solidarity across the Islamic world to ensure the protection of Muslim children against polio.

The meeting was opened by Dr Abdallah Al-Hussaini from Al-Azhar, who delivered the speech of the Grand Imam of Al Azhar. The Grand Imam, in his message, stressed the importance that Islam places on community prosperity and safety, especially for children, as the best guarantee of a better future for the Muslim community. Islam strongly advocates for children's rights and recognizes the right to life as supreme. From this perspective, to ensure the protection of life and health through the prevention of communicable diseases, including vaccine-preventable diseases, is a key value. Islam therefore strongly condemns whoever tries to prevent a child from accessing this basic right, including parents and community leaders, he said.

Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, also welcomed participants and noted that we are at a historic crossroads when, for the second time only, humankind is poised to completely eradicate a disease from the face of the earth. Polio disease, which once paralysed an estimated 1000 children daily throughout the world, has now been brought to the brink of eradication by the development of a very safe vaccine. The Global Polio Eradication Initiative, launched by health ministers during the World Health Assembly of 1988, has been successful in achieving a 99.9% decline of the disease in the world. The disease now needs to be eradicated in three remaining countries: Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan.

Through this effort, more than 10 billion doses of oral poliovaccine (OPV) have been administered to more than 2.5 billion children worldwide, almost a quarter of whom are Muslim children. More than 10 million people are walking today who would otherwise have been paralysed.

Recent lethal outbreaks in countries that had stopped polio, such as China, Congo and Tajikistan, remind the global community of the deadly consequences of failing to complete polio eradication. Concerned by the consequences of failure after so much progress, the World Health Assembly declared in May 2012 the completion of polio eradication an emergency for global public health and called for a marked increase in the intensity of eradication activities in the high-risk areas of the three remaining polio-endemic countries.

Thanks to intensified work last year, 2012 witnessed the lowest number of polio cases in children ever in history. Globally, 222 children were reported to suffer from polio, a 66% decline compared with 2011. In two of the endemic countries, Pakistan and Afghanistan, 65% and 42% fewer children, respectively, suffered from polio as compared with 2011. In Nigeria, however, the number of children affected by polio doubled in 2012.

Concerned that polio still persists in these three countries, and knowing that polio travels long distances very easily and threatens children everywhere, the Ministers of Health of the 23 countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region, during the 2012 Regional Committee, expressed concerns about the situation of polio in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and requested the Regional Director to better understand the technical, social and political barriers to polio eradication in these two countries. The Regional Office has a history of, and a unique mandate for, developing consensus and guidance when advances in medical technology or public health initiatives create controversies or dilemmas that must be reconciled with the Islamic *sharia*.

The aims of this consultation, supported by Al Azhar, one of the leading academic institutions in the Muslim world, were therefore to explore the ways by which the guidance of religious scholars can help to reach a

consensus on how to end polio in the three remaining countries. These countries face a complex web of security challenges, militancy and violence (such as the recent killings of local health workers in Nigeria and Pakistan), which create an environment in which religious sentiments can be exploited, weakening community trust and creating a climate of fear. Ultimately, this results in children remaining unvaccinated and more cases of polio paralysis.

The Muslim *ummah* urgently needs guidance and a consensus among its leaders on how to navigate these controversies, with their misinformation and conflicting information. There is a pressing need for visible solidarity among Islamic scholars and the political and traditional tribal and community leadership. Muslim communities and families need a united, clear and knowledgeable voice that calls for the protection of all children from polio paralysis, a voice that clearly addresses misinformation and counters false propaganda about the nature of the vaccine and the polio eradication programme.

Before the meeting, participants were received by Dr Ahmed El-Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, who welcomed them and highlighted the responsibilities and accountability of the Muslim *ummah* in terms of protecting the health of children. He expressed Al-Azhar's strong condemnation of the recent killings of health workers in Pakistan and Nigeria, and stressed that Islam strictly prohibits any attempt to prevent children from accessing their basic rights, including health and the prevention of disease and disabilities. He emphasized the critical importance of immunizing children against polio and noted that Al-Azhar intended to issue a statement in this regard soon after the consultation.

2. Summary of discussions

There was consensus that Islam prohibits doing harm to oneself or others, and places an obligation to prevent harm. In particular, parents must protect their children from disease. Health was affirmed as a key Muslim value and seeking for cure as obligatory for all Muslims.

It was agreed that the polio vaccine is safe, effective and in accordance with Islamic law, and that immunization is a religious and social responsibility for everyone. Indeed, preventing immunization is forbidden by Islam. It was further noted that polio eradication, using the same vaccine and the same strategy, had been successful in the vast majority of Muslim countries, as well as in most parts of Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan.

The context of conflict in the three countries, creating a climate of mistrust and fear, was acknowledged. It was felt that there is a need to build and restore trust with communities for their active participation in the effort to save their own children from this crippling disease. At the same time, health programmes should never be used as a cover for military intelligence-gathering purposes. The important role of religious leaders and institutions in supporting polio eradication was noted, including during the planning and implementation of vaccination campaigns and the utilization of mosques in addition to other vaccination points/strategies. The significance of, and need for, a common stance and voice on the part of Islamic leaders and institutions was highlighted.

The effective dissemination of Islamic rulings and information was suggested, along with the training of imams. The need to hold meetings on polio vaccination with Islamic scholars in each of the three countries, at both the national and local level, was emphasized. The potential role of Al Azhar in supporting polio eradication was emphasized, including the issuing and dissemination of religious opinions, curricula development, training of imams, and through envoys and its network of graduates. The International Islamic Fiqh Academy and the Federation of Islamic Medical Associations (FIMA) with its extensive network of Muslim medical personnel in countries, expressed full support and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) reaffirmed its commitment to polio eradication.

There was unanimous agreement that monitoring and responding to false claims and misinformation on polio vaccination in the media is of crucial importance. Targeted education campaigns are needed to explain Islamic teaching on polio vaccination, using accessible and easy to understand language. Facts on the safe and *halal* use of the polio vaccine need to be disseminated to all communities where polio transmission still exists.

The creation of a high-level Islamic advisory group was recommended by scholars who requested the development of a proposal and terms of reference for this group. It was envisaged that the group would be led by Al Azhar, in coordination with the International Islamic Fiqh Academy, and that UNICEF and WHO would provide a facilitative and supportive role.

3. Conclusions

- There is consensus that the Muslim *ummah* faces a serious problem of persistent polio that threatens all Muslim children and children throughout the world.
- The scholars expressed concern about the prevalence of rumours and misinformation regarding polio vaccination in the name of Islam.
- The scholars reached a common understanding about the reasons why poliovirus still circulates in some Muslim communities.
- The scholars expressed a strong commitment to achieve a polio-free Islamic world by end 2014.
- Protection of children against polio is a collective responsibility of Islamic societies and their religious, health and political leaders.
- Vaccination of children to protect them from polio is a religious obligation of all Muslim parents.
- The scholars agreed that Islamic religious leadership and institutions have a crucial responsibility to support eradication of polio.
- There is consensus among scholars that the polio vaccine is safe and does not contain any *haram* or harmful substance and does not cause infertility.
- The scholars emphasized that there is an urgent need to rectify misconceptions about the polio eradication programme and polio vaccine.
- The killing of health workers who vaccinate children is completely against the teachings of Islam and is strongly condemned.
- The participants strongly condemn the use of health interventions in intelligence collection and requested WHO to emphasize that all countries of the world should not use any health intervention for any other purpose than the promotion of health and prevention of disease.

4. Recommendations

1. An Islamic advisory group (IAG) should be constituted to build ownership and solidarity for polio eradication across the Muslim *ummah* under the leadership of Al Azhar in collaboration with the International Islamic Fiqh Academy; technical and secretariat support will be provided by WHO and UNICEF.
2. A task force should be formed with representation of key stakeholders to formulate the terms of reference and modus operandi for the proposed advisory group by 14 April 2013.
3. Under the guidance of the IAG, meetings of national and international scholars should be convened soon in the three polio-endemic countries in consultation with the national governments.
4. International and national religious institutions should actively participate in the implementation of the polio eradication campaigns in the three endemic countries; joint field missions should be organized in collaboration with key Islamic institutions and organizations.

5. Recognizing the concern about the rampant misinformation on polio vaccination being circulated in the name of Islam, the religious and technical leadership at all levels should monitor, assess and respond effectively to rumours about polio vaccination in coordination with the IAG.
6. As part of the secretariat function of WHO and UNICEF to the IAG, the two agencies should organize relevant technical information with guidance from religious scholars that addresses the concerns of communities and local religious community leaders.
7. Appropriate information on polio vaccination should be disseminated widely, especially to all imams, religious leaders and institutions, and relevant media, using effective dissemination mechanisms.
8. Polio-related information and *fatwa* should be disseminated to all parents and communities, particularly those who visit primary health units and health facilities, in easy to understand language.
9. Religious leaders and institutions should collaborate closely with the polio eradication programme in planning effective and appropriate strategies to reach children in the three endemic countries.
10. The IAG should seek to link with all Muslim humanitarian and professional organizations and bodies for active involvement in immunization.