



13 December 2022, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia – At its ninth annual meeting, the Islamic Advisory Group (IAG) reiterated its commitment to addressing current and emerging public health challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean Region and beyond and using religion to dispel misconceptions around public health.

This year’s IAG meeting was hosted by the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, with the participation of the International Islamic Fiqh Academy (IIFA), Al Azhar Al Sharif, and the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB). The theme of the meeting is “Partnering for change: leveraging faith to promote public health”, to highlight the role of the IAG and its partners in engaging communities around the Region to promote public health.

An expansion of the role of the IAG, based on its success and lessons learned from implementation of polio and COVID-19 response interventions, was discussed during the meeting. The repositioning of its role is based on leveraging religious leaders and scholars for greater engagement on broader public health issues related to maternal and child health, routine immunization and healthier lifestyles. The new vision for the IAG is to “Promote health and well-being of Muslim communities and populations at large through Islamic teachings to build ownership, solidarity and support for public health interventions.” This includes expanding

the network of Islamic academic institutions, as well as a geographical expansion of IAG's interventions to countries beyond WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Region, specifically to the Sahel region in Africa.

Representing H.E Mr Hissein Brahim Taha, Secretary General of the OIC, Assistant Secretary General for Humanitarian, Cultural and Social Affairs Ambassador Tariq Ali Bakheet noted that the IAG repositioning plans, which include venturing into other geographical areas, is bound to bring dividends to its work and benefit the communities involved.

"The IAG is commended for having been far-sighted enough to know that even as we continue to focus on eradicating the virus, we must look beyond polio. After all, the communities that are most affected by polio face many other threats to health and lack access to the services and tools to protect them," His Excellency added.

On behalf of His Eminence, the Grand Imam of Al Azhar Al Sharif, Dr Abbas Shouman, Former Deputy of Al Azhar Al Sharif and member of the Islamic Research Academy, stated that Al Azhar had previously issued several fatwas that correct religious misconceptions and rumours on the polio vaccine and other vaccines.

"IAG's expansion to address areas such as maternal, child and newborn health is very important and we encourage the group to work on also addressing migrant health in the future. Finally, we hope that next year we can announce that we have finally eradicated polio globally during the tenth annual meeting of the IAG," His Eminence stated.

Echoing his trust in vaccinations, his Eminence Sheikh Dr Saleh Bin Abdullah Bin Humaid, President of IIFA and a member of the Council of Senior Scholars, mentioned that the preservation of life and health were one of the essential priorities in the objectives of Shariah.

"I commend what has been achieved by this constructive partnership and the national Islamic advisory groups in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Somalia to correct religious misconceptions. Allah the Almighty says: "Whoever saves a life is as though he had saved all mankind (Surah Al-Ma'idah-32)."

Representing H.E. President of IsDB Dr Muhammad Al Jasser, Mr Mohammad Jamal Al-Saati, Special Advisor to the President of IsDB, stated that the Ebola virus and COVID-19 had highlighted the role of religious scholars in raising awareness and further stressing to the public the importance of safety procedures, such as physical distancing, from an Islamic Fiqh perspective.

H.E. Sheikh Dr Shawki Allam, Grand Mufti of Egypt, stated that on this day religious institutions were coming together to leverage the role of religion in promoting public health.

“Self-preservation is one of the purposes of Shariah Our role model, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) valued community matters and issues. It was narrated from Hudhayfah (may Allah be pleased with him) that the Prophet said: “Whoever does not care about the Muslims is not one of them.”

On behalf of WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, Dr Rana Hajjeh, Director of Programme Management at the WHO Regional Office, reflected on how the role of religious leaders and scholars had been critical in shaping cultural and social norms and behaviours, which had led to improvements in the health and well-being of the communities that they serve. “The IAG is a shining example of “Health for All by All” which brings together religious, political, financing institutions and technical partners to make a significant contribution to addressing current and emerging public health challenges. I look forward to further action on the recommendations emanating from the meeting,” she added.

As a reflection on IAG’ efforts in the global and regional response to pandemics and outbreaks, the meeting statement commends ongoing deployment of IAG assets for other national health priorities and emergencies in Pakistan and Afghanistan, notably the flood relief efforts in Pakistan, earthquake response efforts in Afghanistan and the ongoing COVID-19 response in the Region. The statement also emphasizes the need for urgent steps to avert the risk of outbreaks of preventable diseases, including polio, consequent to the decline in immunization coverage due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It was decided during the end of the one day-meeting that Al Azhar Al Sharif will host the tenth annual meeting at Cairo, Egypt, during the second week of December 2023.

Note for editors

The IAG is a partnership, established in 2013, between Al Azhar Al Sharif, the IIFA, the OIC and the IsDB and includes other religious scholars and technical experts. The main objective of the IAG is addressing misconceptions constraining public health interventions and leveraging scholars and imams as agents of change.

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