

9 December 2021, Cairo, Egypt – In its eighth annual meeting, the Islamic Advisory Group (IAG) reiterated its commitment to continue supporting the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, echoing its trust in the safety and effectiveness of all routine childhood vaccinations as a lifesaving tool that aligns with Islamic shariah.

The meeting further emphasized the key role of the IAG in addressing public health priorities as part of its expanded mandate, which extends to improving the health and well-being of people guided by the teachings of Islam and supporting mother and child health initiatives.

This year's IAG meeting was hosted by Al Azhar Al Sharif in Cairo, Egypt, under the co-chairmanship of Al Azhar and the International Islamic Fiqh Academy (IIFA) with the participation of the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB). In a statement issued at the end of the one-day meeting, it was noted with optimism the decline in wild poliovirus cases in the 2 remaining polio-endemic countries of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The statement also commended the indispensable efforts made by governments, national Islamic advisory groups, religious scholars and community leaders in raising awareness about the importance of vaccination, dismissing misconceptions about the polio vaccine and overcoming vaccination refusals.

As the meeting took place amid difficulties facing health services in Afghanistan affecting the availability of essential health care, the IAG urged donors to protect livelihoods, and ease suffering in Afghanistan.

Among the topics discussed during the meeting was the significant role of Islamic scholars and organizations in rectifying people's understanding about public health matters, especially COVID-19.

The IAG accordingly hailed the pivotal role of Al Azhar Al Sharif, the International Fiqh Academy and IAG national groups in supporting the COVID-19 response by advocating for strict adherence to preventive health measures, dispelling misinformation and encouraging people to

take the available COVID-19 vaccines.

Representing His Eminence the Grand Imam of Al Azhar Al Sharif, His Eminence Professor Dr. Mohamed AbdelRahman El Dweiny, Deputy of Al Azhar Al Sharif reiterated that ensuring children received all routine vaccinations was a top priority for countries to protect children from life-threatening diseases and he called on parents to respond to all vaccination campaigns as a lawful duty.

“The responsibility to dispel rumours and misconceptions about vaccinations is a societal responsibility that media institutions, religious institutions and health institutions should work towards achieving,” His eminence added.

In his opening speech, His Eminence Sheikh Dr Saleh Bin Abdullah Bin Humaid, President of IIFA and a member of the Council of Senior Scholars reiterated that, “Following sharia rulings during the COVID-19 pandemic had an immense role in establishing community health awareness that resulted in the commitment of a high number of people to health precautions, vaccinations and immunizations.”

His Eminence also acclaimed the role of scholars and preachers in calling on communities to follow the instructions of doctors and health care workers to overcome COVID-19 and its variants.

Mr Hissein Brahim Taha, Secretary General of the OIC, stated that the IAG had been widely recognized for its efforts in raising awareness about shariah-compliant preventive measures to curb the spread of COVID-19. “In light of the possibility of the COVID-19 recurring waves and its variants, we hope that IAG’s efforts to mitigate the spread of the virus will remain part of the team’s activities,” he added.

In his speech, Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, expressed his gratitude to the IAG leadership for their support to the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic. “The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the crucial role of faith-based organizations and leaders in responding to public health emergencies and disease outbreaks. WHO has worked closely with the IAG to develop guidance for mass religious gatherings and rituals, and the IAG has been a key partner in WHO’s strategy on engaging faith-based

organizations and actors to support the COVID-19 response,” said Dr Al-Mandhari.

As a reflection of the importance of prioritizing vaccine supply, the IAG called on high-income countries, international development funds and philanthropic organizations to provide financial support and vaccine donations to the COVAX Facility to help address vaccine inequity.

## **Editor’s note**

The IAG is an Islamic consortium that was established in 2013 between Al Azhar Al Sharif, the IIFA, the OIC and the IsDB and includes other religious scholars and technical experts. The objective of the IAG is to raise awareness about priority health issues among local communities by aligning technical and religious perspectives and leveraging religious scholars, mosque imams and community influencers.

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