

WORLD BREASTFEEDING WEEK

Protecting breastfeeding is a shared responsibility

FAHMIDA HASHEM

THE theme of this year's World Breastfeeding Week (August 1 to 7) is "Protecting Breastfeeding, a Shared Responsibility". In the midst of the global pandemic, with our heightened awareness of the importance of health and robust immunity, it is vital to remember that breast milk is the optimum food for babies. Breastfeeding

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is the recommended, ideal, natural, and most sustainable food for the healthy growth and development of infants and young children. The recommendation for infants of zero to six months is to breastfeed them exclusively, until the age of two years. That is, to only feed on breast milk and nothing else.

The key to successful breastfeeding is that mothers are empowered to feed their babies anytime and anywhere, which means they need broad-based support across society. Mothers can face significant roadblocks to breastfeeding their babies even when this delicate process goes well for them after the birth of their baby. Given the many stressors on households, sometimes mothers find themselves in hostile home environments and social circles which harbour negative attitudes towards breastfeeding. The need to earn and return to work puts pressure on working mothers to give up breastfeeding. This is why protecting breastfeeding needs to be given a whole-of-society support to ensure that we have work and social environments that are breastfeeding-friendly. How do we do this? It starts with understanding the barriers to breastfeeding that many mothers face. Partners can help mothers with the

domestic workload as well as with the caring of the baby. Being hands-on with activities such as baby bathing, burping, talking, singing, and playing can be a great form of support. Doing grocery shopping, helping with food preparation, and cleaning the house also creates a supportive environment for breastfeeding mothers. Raising children is never supposed to be a one-person job and partners of new mothers have a major impact on creating a home environment conducive to breastfeeding for the optimum health of both the mother and the baby. When a partner is supportive, mothers are more likely to breastfeed, particularly if they act as her advocate when she experiences difficulties.

Family and friends should be cheerleaders for breastfeeding. It makes such a difference to encourage mothers on their journey to provide their babies with the best nutrition. Even if you did not have a positive breastfeeding experience with your baby, each woman should make sure to fully encourage the new mothers in their social circle to continue with it for as long as possible.

Workplace support can make a real difference as well when it comes to maintaining breastfeeding after the

end of maternity leave. We certainly need some workplace policies to be put in place that are designed to create an enabling environment to support breastfeeding mothers. Breastfeeding those who have returned to work should be entitled to two 30-minute breaks to express breast milk. A private room and refrigeration facilities for safely storing breast milk can provide further necessary support.

Society needs to be aware of attitudes that discourage breastfeeding and sometimes even shame breastfeeding mothers. Breastfeeding is perfectly natural and should be normalised and championed across communities. We each must do our part to support, promote and protect breastfeeding as a national asset. It makes sense for us to ensure that our breastfeeding moms feel valued for the great choice they are making, often sacrificing their own comfort for the wellbeing of their babies.

Interventions to improve breastfeeding should not be targeted solely at the mother, however. Those around her have considerable influence and need education about the importance of breastfeeding and about their roles as supporters, particularly for older generations whose breastfeeding knowledge originates from a time when infant-feeding advice was markedly different. Educating family members, especially the maternal grandmother, extended family, and the father of the baby may provide a better means of providing information and enhancing support—at least in the context of Bangladesh.

Everyone—from decision-makers, healthcare institutions, healthcare

professionals, employers, the media, experts, family members, colleagues, to friends—in their own capacity can assist in the breastfeeding process by providing support, advice, commitment, promotion, care, enabling flexible hours for working mothers, or even just by encouraging breastfeeding.

Alongside enhanced investment in breastfeeding support to prevent difficulties from arising, greater and wider investment is needed in supporting new mothers. Mothers need to feel socially supported in their new role, which can also help give them more confidence to breastfeed.

Governments must invest financially in protecting new mothers, not least because of the potential financial return. However, although some aspects such as laws and policy can easily be universal, given limited economies, interventions must focus on those who are the most vulnerable such as mothers from the poorer sections of our society.

New mothers need the support to recover from the rigours of pregnancy and childbirth so that they can cope well with the different challenges presented by infant care. Nothing compares to breastfeeding a baby; it is priceless for their healthy growth. It not only provides them with necessary nutrition, but also protects them from various diseases. Let us support and encourage mothers in those critical hours after birth, and continue the support for the first six months of the baby's life and also over the longer term as they strive to do their best for their children. Protecting breastfeeding is one essential element of this support.

Fahmida Hashem is a senior nutritionist at Labaid Cardiac Hospital.

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PHOTO: STAR

Afghanistan may be a bellwether for Saudi-Iranian rivalry



JAMES M DORSEY

BOASTING an almost 1,000-kilometre border with Iran and a history of troubled relations between the Iranians and Sunni Muslim militants, including the Taliban, Afghanistan could become a bellwether for the future of the

rivalry between the Islamic Republic and Saudi Arabia.

Had the United States withdrawn from Afghanistan several years earlier, chances would have been that Saudi Arabia would have sought to exploit military advances by the Taliban in far less subtle ways than it may do now.

Saudi Arabia was still channelling funds in 2017 to anti-Iranian, anti-Shiite militants in the Iranian-Afghan-Pakistani border triangle and further south on the Pakistani side of the frontier, despite Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's efforts to distance the kingdom from identification with austere interpretations of Islam that shaped the country's history and that it shared with the Taliban.

"The Taliban is a religious extremist group which is no stranger to extremism and murder, especially murdering Shias, and its hands are stained with the blood of our diplomats," noted an Iranian cleric, referring to the 1998 killing of eight Iranian diplomats and a journalist in Afghanistan.

Outgoing Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif outlined the potential tripwire Afghanistan constitutes for Iran.

"If Iran doesn't play well and makes an enemy out of the Taliban soon, I think some Arab countries in the Persian Gulf and the US would attempt to finance and direct the Taliban to weaken Tehran and divert its

attention away from Iraq and other Arab countries. The biggest threat for us would be the formation of an anti-Iran political system in Afghanistan," Zarif said.

Comparing the potential problems for Iran with an Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban, or a neighbouring country at war with itself to Saudi Arabia's Houthi troubles in Yemen, is tempting. Saudi Arabia was, before the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan, one of only three countries to recognise the Taliban's control of the country. At the time, it saw virtue in stirring the pot on Iran's borders.

Much has changed not only in the last two decades, but also in the last few years since both Saudi Arabia and some Trump administration officials—like national security advisor John Bolton—were toying with the idea of attempting to spark ethnic insurgencies inside Iran. And neither is Afghanistan Yemen, nor is the Taliban the Houthis.

The Taliban have sought in recent weeks to assure Afghanistan's neighbours that they seek cooperation and would not be supporting militancy beyond their country's borders. Iran last month hosted talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government that ended with a joint statement calling for a peaceful political settlement, and declaring that "war is not the solution."

It has been war ever since. From the Saudi perspective, it would not be the first time that the Taliban have said one thing and done another, including keeping an alleged promise prior to 9/11 that Osama Bin Laden would not be allowed to plan and organise attacks from Afghan soil and subsequent refusal to hand over the Saudi national.

All of this is not to say that Afghanistan could not emerge as a venue for Middle Eastern rivalries involving not only Saudi Arabia and Iran, but potentially also Turkey and Qatar. It probably will, albeit one in



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PHOTO: AFP/STR

which battles are likely to be fought less through proxies and more economically and culturally, and in which alliances will look significantly different than in the past.

A crucial factor in how the rivalries play out will be the Taliban's attitude towards non-Pashtun ethnic and religious groups.

"If Afghanistan returns to the situation before September 11, 2001, when the Taliban were at war with the Shia Hazara and the Turkic Uzbeks, then Iran and Turkey will almost inevitably be drawn in on the other side—especially if Saudi Arabia resumes support for the Taliban as a way of attacking Iran... Ideally, a regional consensus could successfully pressure the Taliban to respect the autonomy of minority areas," said Eurasia scholar Anatol Lieven.

Supporting the Taliban, a group that is

identified with the violation of women's rights, could prove tricky for Prince Mohammed as he seeks to convince the international community that the kingdom has broken with an ultra-conservative strand of Islam that inspired groups like the Afghan militants.

It would also complicate the crown prince's efforts to project his country as a beacon of a moderate and tolerant form of the faith, and complicate relations with the United States.

Moreover, Prince Mohammed's religious soft power strategy may be working. In a sign of changing times, Western non-governmental organisations like Germany's Konrad Adenauer Foundation look to Saudi Arabia as a model for the Taliban.

"The way Saudi Arabia has developed in the past 10, 20 years is remarkable. I have seen with my own eyes how much [they]

have reconciled modern life, women's rights, women education, work-life, and still guarding [their] Islamic values. This could be a certain role model for the Taliban," said Ellinor Zeino, the Foundation's Afghanistan country director, in a webinar hosted by the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRI).

Saudi steps so far to moderate the Taliban and facilitate a peaceful resolution of the Afghanistan conflict are however unlikely to have ingratiated the kingdom with the Taliban. A Saudi-hosted Islamic Conference on the Declaration of Peace in Afghanistan in the holy city of Mecca in June, attended by Afghan and Pakistani Islamic scholars and government officials, condemned the recent violence as having "no justification" and asserting that "it could not be called jihad."

Fuelling the fire, Yusuf Bin Ahmed Al Uthaymeen, the secretary-general of the 57-nation, Saudi-dominated Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), told the conference that the Taliban-led violence amounted to "genocide against Muslims."

The rhetoric notwithstanding, conservative Iran's inclination to accommodate the Taliban as President-elect Ebrahim Raisi takes office, in a twist of irony, could see the Islamic republic and the kingdom both backing a group with a history of fire-breathing anti-Shiism, if it comes to power in Kabul.

Mehdi Jafari, an Afghan Shiite refugee in Belgium, said, "[The Iranians] have much more to gain from the Taliban. Hazaras are a weak player to choose in this war. Iran is a country before it is a religious institution. They will first choose things that benefit their country before they look at what benefits the Shia."

Dr. James M. Dorsey is an award-winning journalist and a senior fellow at Nanyang Technological University's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore and the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute.

QUOTABLE Quote

ISABEL ALLENDE
(born August 2, 1942)
Chilean writer

I can promise you that women working together—linked, informed and educated—can bring peace and prosperity to this forsaken planet.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Doorbell sound
- 6 Baseball's Ty
- 10 Can't stand
- 11 Camp craft
- 12 Aids in crime
- 13 Hunter in the stars
- 14 Old Italian coin
- 15 Whatever person
- 16 Greek vowel
- 17 Epitome of easiness
- 18 Tennis need
- 19 Rats
- 22 Bulls or Bears
- 23 Sunrise site
- 26 Some snakes
- 29 Georgia airport code
- 32 Maiden name

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- 21 Mineo of movies
- 24 Discussion group
- 25 Car price reducer
- 27 Cowboy nickname
- 28 Boat backs
- 29 Travel aid
- 30 Cook's mint
- 31 "Two Women" star
- 35 Orange cover
- 36 Latvia's capital
- 38 Research site

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT