

'Obama's re-election vital for Middle East engagement'
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By Victor WS Tan

US President Barack Obama's re-election is vital to continue America's efforts to engage the Middle East in its foreign policy, Raja Muda of Perak Raja Nazrin Shah said today.

"President Obama, after he was elected, sought a shift toward a more mature international policy.

"Unfortunately, the president has faced strong opposition from home, from Israel. He is criticised for being weak," said Raja Nazrin said when launching Munir Majid's book, '9/11 and the attacks against Muslims'.

Munir, a visiting senior fellow with the Southeast Asia International Affairs Programme at London-based LSE-Ideas, was a former group editor at New Straits Times.

Among other posts he held, Munir was also founder-executive chairperson of the Malaysian Securities Commission. After seven years as chairperson of Malaysia Airlines (MAS), he stepped down in July last year.

Raja Nazrin said relations between the West and the Middle East would depend very much on whether policies initiated by Obama could overcome challenges through the coming presidential election period, and stay focused.

'People assume Islam is incompatible with democracy'

"Prejudice remains even in this age of the Internet and freedom of information. Similarities are overlooked, failings are magnified.

"Amid a climate of violence and terrorism, people assume that Islam is incompatible with democracy. It does not help that Islamic names are often given to religious movements, and unarmed civilians are killed in the name of Islam," Raja Nazrin said.

According to reports, Obama changed the tune of US foreign policy toward the Middle East after his election in 2008.

Among the measures he has initiated are eliminating the use of the sobriquet 'War on terror', which has characterised former president George Bush's post-9/11 campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Obama has also sought to engage with leaders of the Middle East countries, travelling around the region in efforts to build peace.

Stressing the importance of engaging with one another, Raja Nazrin said that it was crucial the parties involved in disputes clarified their mutual misconceptions and engaged with one another for peace.

"It will be bad, both for the West and for the Muslim world, if Obama's courageous beginning... Comes to a brief (end)", he added.

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