

Obama begins Middle East visit

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President Barack Obama arrived in Saudi Arabia on Wednesday at the start of an historic visit to the region in which he will deliver a much-anticipated speech reaching out to the Muslim world.

In an apparent attempt to counter the impact of Mr Obama's visit, Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda leader, said the US president had planted seeds for "revenge and hatred" towards the United States in the Muslim world.

The US president will hold talks with King Abdullah, a key US ally, before flying to Egypt on Thursday where he will deliver his much-anticipated speech.

The stop in Saudi Arabia, the world's largest oil producer and home to Islam's two holiest sites, was a last minute addition to the trip, his first to the Middle East since becoming president, which analysts said was an acknowledgement of the kingdom's role in regional politics and international energy markets.

In remarks to King Abdullah before the formal talks began, the US president praised the Saudi monarch's "wisdom and graciousness", adding: "I thought it was very important to come to the place where Islam began and to seek His Majesty's counsel and to discuss with him many of the issues that we confront here in the Middle East".

Mr Obama has already said he wants to discuss oil prices with King Abdullah, while Saudi Arabia, a regional political and financial heavyweight, is also a key figure in the Middle East process and has influence in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Mr Obama is expected to discuss a proposal to send Yemeni detainees held in Guantánamo Bay to Saudi Arabia to participate in the kingdom's rehabilitation programme.

Saudi officials and diplomats have warned that al-Qaeda operatives are regrouping in Yemen's lawless hinterland, and Yemeni prisoners have previously escaped or been released from its prisons. Saudi officials will also be hoping the new US administration pays more heed to their advice.

After the September 11 attacks on the US, Saudi-US relations plummeted after 15 of the 19 hijackers were discovered to be Saudis. Following initial denials, the kingdom – the birthplace of Bin Laden – did acknowledge the problem of home-grown militants and has pursued its own anti-terror campaign.

Relations between Washington and Riyadh improved, but the Saudis, like other Arab states were frustrated by President George W. Bush's unilateral approach to the Middle East and his administration's lack of attention to the Arab-Israeli crisis.

But while many Arabs are cautiously optimistic about the Obama administration, observers have urged the need to see American actions and not just words, particularly in regard to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

"The new administration has succeeded so far in its outreach to the Muslim world," said Abdelaziz al Qassim, a Saudi lawyer. "But we need to see tangible steps to really build confidence. We want to see actions that will help create the right environment in the Arab world."

Washington's recent diplomatic outreach to Tehran has also raised concerns in the Arab world about Shia Iran's increasing influence in the region, as well as its nuclear ambitions.

Saudi officials have warned against any possible US deal with Iran that would come at the Arabs' expense, and Saudi Arabia is leading Arab efforts to counter Tehran's regional influence.

Robert Gates, US defence secretary, attempted to assuage these fears when he visited the region last month. "The Arabs think the US will change its policy with Iran – they do not understand they are merely changing tactics, not policy," said one Riyadh-based western observer.

Oil prices will also be high on the agenda during Mr Obama's visit to Saudi Arabia.

When the price of a barrel of crude surged to a record \$147 last year, some US commentators blamed Saudi Arabia for failing to help stabilise oil markets.

Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, attributed the price fluctuations to speculators rather than supply and demand fundamentals.

"I don't think that it's in Saudi Arabia's interests or our interests to have a situation in which our economy... is disrupted constantly by huge spikes in energy prices," Mr Obama said last week.

Oil windfalls have enabled the kingdom to shift from a debtor to creditor as it has accumulated around \$500bn in foreign reserves, much of which is invested in US Treasuries.

Mr Obama's meeting with King Abdullah, who is 84, will be his second in three months. The two leaders met at the G20 summit in London and described it as friendly and productive.

Many Saudis are hoping that their relationship will grow warmer following the US president's visit.

Al Watan newspaper summed up popular opinion in a cartoon showing President Bush carrying a "why they hate us" sign being pelted with shoes. In contrast, President Obama is showered with flowers, with his sign saying "why they love us".

A Saudi poet published a whole page poem, usually reserved for royals, praising Mr Obama's decision to stop by Saudi Arabia.

"Welcome home oh president of the US," it read. "You came to seek the wisdom of our king. After God we have great expectations from Abu Motaab (King Abdullah) and you. We cannot express our gratitude for choosing us. God bless you and your principles of dialogue."

Financial Times, London, New York, June 3rd, 2009, World, online.