

## Press release

Paris, October 3, 2025

### **The French Agency for AIUla Development (AFALULA) welcomes the opening of Villa Hegra, a new landmark of Saudi-French cultural dialogue and creation**

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Villa Hegra was officially inaugurated on October 2, 2025, in AIUla, in the presence of His Highness Prince Badr bin Farhan Al Saud, Minister of Culture, Governor of the Royal Commission for AIUla (RCU), and Chairman of the Villa Hegra Foundation, alongside representatives of the Saudi and French governments, as well as numerous cultural, artistic, academic, and economic figures.

The Kingdom's first bilateral institution dedicated to cultural cooperation and contemporary creation, Villa Hegra embodies the shared ambition of Saudi Arabia and France to position AIUla as an internationally renowned cultural and artistic destination.

Established following an intergovernmental agreement signed on December 4, 2021, Villa Hegra was constituted by Royal Decree on December 4, 2024, during the visit of French President Emmanuel Macron to Riyadh and AIUla. It offers a space for creation and transmission across a wide range of disciplines, including visual arts, design, performing arts, cinema, and research.

After two years of off-site programming launched in 2023, Villa Hegra opens the doors of its newly renovated buildings, located in the heart of AIUla. The site includes an exhibition hall, artist studios, educational spaces, the region's first studio dedicated to the performing arts, as well as an auditorium hosting AIUla's first indoor cinema.

Under the artistic direction of the Saudi-French duo Gaël Charbau and Basmah Felemban, Villa Hegra launches its 2025-2026 cultural season. This inaugural program will feature artist residencies, partnerships with major French institutions, original exhibitions, educational workshops, and academic exchanges.

On the occasion of its inauguration, Villa Hegra held the first meeting of its Foundation's Board of Directors, chaired by His Highness Prince Badr bin Farhan Al Saud.

On October 21, 2025, Villa Hegra will officially join the prestigious international network of cultural Villas, alongside Villa Medici (Rome), Casa de Velázquez (Madrid), Villa Kujoyama (Kyoto), and Villa Albertine (United States). This membership will further strengthen artistic and academic exchanges on a global scale.

**Jean-Yves Le Drian, Chairman of AFALULA, declared:**



“The opening of Villa Hegra marks a major milestone in cultural cooperation between France and Saudi Arabia. Villa Hegra embodies the encounter between the heart of the Arab world and French creative spirit. This leading cultural institution, dedicated to the promotion of the arts and artistic innovation, seals the ambitious cultural dialogue initiated between France and the Kingdom and extends it further towards a broader cooperation between European and Arab cultures. Villa Hegra illustrates the vitality of intercultural exchange and contributes to strengthening the relations of sharing and mutual enrichment between our two nations.”

**Feriel Fodil, CEO of Villa Hegra**, added: “The opening of Villa Hegra marks a decisive step. This unique place now becomes the vibrant heart of our artistic and cultural programming, offering artists and audiences, both local and international, a space for creation, collaboration, and transmission. It embodies our profound ambition: to awaken artistic sensibilities, reveal talents, and inspire new vocations.”

Resulting from the collaboration between its two founding entities, the Royal Commission for AIUla (RCU) and the French Agency for AIUla Development (AFALULA), Villa Hegra is conceived as a cornerstone of cultural and artistic dialogue between Saudi Arabia and France, serving Vision 2030 and contributing to AIUla’s and Saudi Arabia’s international outreach.

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#### **About AFALULA (French Agency for AIUla Development)**

The French Agency for AIUla Development (AFALULA) was established to support its Saudi partner, the Royal Commission for AIUla, in the transformation of the AIUla region into a worldwide cultural and touristic destination. Born from an intergovernmental agreement signed by Saudi Arabia and France in April 2018, AFALULA opened its Paris office in July 2018. The Agency is organized around specialized centers of expertise, namely: architecture, development, culture and heritage, archaeology, tourism and hospitality, human capital, environment and infrastructure, perfumes and botany, agriculture, equestrian and security. AFALULA has been establishing several partnerships with French and international experts, companies and operators, which include representatives from both the academic and architecture realms. Under the terms of the intergovernmental agreement of December 4, 2021, the Agency is responsible, on behalf of the French Government, for the Villa Hegra’s cultural, educational, and artistic program.

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#### **About RCU (Royal Commission for AIUla)**

The Royal Commission for AIUla (RCU) was established by Royal Decree in July 2017 to preserve and develop AIUla, a region of outstanding natural and cultural significance in north-west Saudi Arabia. Its long-term development plan encompasses a broad range of initiatives across archaeology, tourism, culture, education, and the arts, reflecting a commitment to meeting the economic diversification, local community empowerment, and heritage preservation priorities of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s *Vision 2030* program. It is founded on a sustainable approach that aims to preserve the natural and historical heritage of the region while positioning AIUla as an attractive place to live, work, and visit.

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#### **About Villa Hegra**

Born of an intergovernmental agreement signed in 2021 between Saudi Arabia and France, Villa Hegra is the first bilateral institution dedicated to cross-cultural cooperation and contemporary creation. This unique venue, the first of its kind in the Arabian Peninsula, aspires to become a pillar of creative dialogue, bringing together the best of Saudi and French cultures of today and tomorrow in one place. As a member of the international network of cultural Villas (Villa Medici, Casa de Velázquez, Villa Kujoyama, Villa Albertine), Villa Hegra strives to strengthen the relationship of sharing and mutual enrichment between the two nations. It is a platform dedicated to exploring and promoting new artistic and creative horizons, in the heart of AIUla. A cornerstone of the *Journey Through Time* regional Masterplan, and more broadly of the *Vision 2030* strategic vision, it aligns with the strategic priorities of the Royal Commission for AIUla (RCU) and the French Agency for AIUla Development (AFALULA). Through its off-site preopening phase launched in 2023, Villa Hegra has embedded itself in the local ecosystem by launching a series of cultural initiatives open to all. Its site, inaugurated in October 2025, hosts its artistic and cultural programming, offering a space for local and international artists and audiences to meet, exchange ideas, and create.



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