

Beat: Politics

RABAT 1stPM SEBASTIEN LECORNU'S MAIDEN FOREIGN TRIP SIGNALS A GOOD BILTERAL SIGN

A NEW ERA IN FRANCE–MOROCCO RELATIONS

Paris, Washington DC, 14.07.2026, 00:12 Time

USPA NEWS - France is using Sebastien Lecornu's first foreign trip as prime minister to formalise the "return to strategic realism" with Morocco: a dense two?day visit to Rabat that prepares a new, more balanced treaty of friendship while unlocking key economic dossiers on aerospace, water and energy. The choice of Rabat, immediately after a difficult period in the relationship and just months before King Mohammed VI's expected state visit to France, underlines how central this partnership has become for Paris in Africa and the wider Mediterranean.

FRANCE AND MOROCCO REWRITE THEIR STORY: LECORNU'S VISIT TO RABAT OPENS THE WAY TO A NEW TREATY OF FRIENDSHIP

For his first trip abroad as young French Prime Minister, Sebastien Lecornu has chosen Rabat. On 15 and 16 July 2026, he will cochair in the Moroccan capital the High Joint Franco-Moroccan Commission, accompanied by a delegation of around a dozen ministers. This bilateral body had not met since 2019, a long hiatus that mirrored several years of diplomatic chill between Paris and Rabat. Its relaunch marks a major step in the reset of the relationship, after the "je t'aime, moi non plus" phase that tested what remains, at its core, a deep historical, economic and human partnership between the two countries.

The timing is not neutral. The visit comes after President Emmanuel Macron's reconciliation trip to Morocco in April 2025 (After a first trop on in October 2024) and ahead of a planned state visit by H.M King Mohammed VI to France, during which a new treaty of friendship is expected to be signed. That treaty is meant to replace the old La Celle-Saint-Cloud framework of 1955 and to enshrine a more modern, equal-to-equal relationship: France's main strategic partner south of the Mediterranean, and Morocco's most important long-term ally outside the European Union.

A HEAVYWEIGHT DELEGATION AND A PRECISE PROGRAMME

Prime Minister Sebastien Lecornu will arrive in Rabat on the evening of Wednesday 15 July, where he and his ministers will be welcomed at the airport by Moroccan prime minister Aziz Akhannouch and several members of the Moroccan government. The program, made public by Matignon, is dense and ceremonial. On Thursday morning, the French delegation will begin with a wreath laying ceremony at the royal mausoleum of H.M Mohammed V, including a brief moment of reflection in front of the tombs of H.M Mohammed V and H.M Hassan II and the signing of the visitors' book.

He will then hold a bilateral meeting with Moroccan Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch at the primature, followed by a plenary session of the high?level meeting at the foreign ministry, co-chaired by both heads of government. After opening statements and a closed?door session, the foreign ministers will deliver concluding remarks, before closing statements from Sebastien Lecornu and Aziz Akhannouch and the formal signing of a series of agreements. A joint press conference is scheduled late morning, and the visit will conclude with an official lunch offered by H.M King Mohammed VI, presided over by the Moroccan prime minister, before a departure ceremony at the airport in the late afternoon.

ECONOMIC FILES ON THE TABLE: AIRBUS, WATER AND ENERGY

Behind the protocol, several sensitive economic dossiers are expected to be arbitrated on the margins of the visit. One concerns Airbus and Royal Air Maroc's future aircraft order: the exact number of planes and, above all, the strategic question of slots granted to the Moroccan airline in Paris airports remain under discussion. Another file involves Veolia and a major desalination plant project, a key issue in a region where water security is becoming increasingly central.

A third dossier relates to the energy partnership between Engie and the OCP Group, Morocco's phosphate and fertiliser giant, which

has fallen behind schedule. Here again, a political push at the highest level is expected to unlock stalled negotiations and send a signal that the economic pillar of the relationship will be reinforced. These issues come on top of an already dense trade relationship: bilateral exchanges reached a record 14.8 billion euros in 2024, with Morocco absorbing more than 40% of French exports to the African continent and France remaining the kingdom's leading economic and financial partner.

A HIGH LEVEL MEETING AND A "COMITÉ DES SAGES"

The Moroccan Rabat visit will also allow progress on the work of the Franco-Moroccan "Comité des sages", which includes figures such as Hubert Vedrine, Leila Slimani, Ross McInnes and Sarah El Hairy, high commissioner for children. This group is tasked with thinking through the future of the relationship beyond day-to-day politics, including issues of memory, education, cultural ties and the shared human fabric created by migration and diaspora communities.

During the high-level meeting itself, ministers from both sides will hold separate sectoral sessions, on economy, security, culture, education and energy, while the plenary will serve as a political umbrella. The visit is presented in Rabat as one of the most important bilateral encounters since the arrival of the new French ambassador, Philippe Lalliot, and as a prelude to the new friendship treaty that should be signed in Paris during H.M Mohammed VI's next state visit.

TOWARDS A NEW, BALANCED FRIENDSHIP TREATY

According to Moroccan and French sources, the new treaty in preparation is designed to turn the page on a post-colonial framework that no longer reflects the realities of either country. The agreement, which will replace the 1955 La Celle-Saint-Cloud accord, is built around four main pillars: economy and industry; security and defence; culture and francophonie; and politics and geostrategy. The ambition is to make Morocco France's main strategic partner outside the EU, while consolidating France as Morocco's key long-term ally.

On the economic front, the treaty would foresee major French investments in Moroccan industry, notably in automotive, rail, defence and maritime transport with the goal of modernising these sectors using advanced technologies and supporting exports. In return, Morocco would offer preferential access to its market for French companies in infrastructure, maritime and rail transport, renewable energies and defence-related industrial projects, supported by tax incentives that would give France a competitive edge over other partners.

SECURITY, DEFENCE AND GEO-STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

Security and defence form the second pillar of the new architecture. The treaty is expected to deepen cooperation in the military-industrial field, including the transfer of French defence technologies to Morocco with the long-term objective of turning the kingdom into a regional production hub for light and heavy equipment: aviation, munitions, armoured vehicles and other systems. Joint training programmes and exercises would be expanded, and intelligence and security coordination strengthened, particularly in relation to Sahel-region instability and shared counter-terrorism concerns.

On the geo-strategic front, the emerging treaty also touches on politically sensitive issues such as Western Sahara, where France's evolving position and support for Moroccan proposals would carry significant symbolic and diplomatic weight. In parallel, cultural and francophonie ties, the third pillar, are meant to recognise the depth of shared language, education and media space, while also opening the way for a more balanced cultural dialogue in which Morocco's own creative and academic ecosystems are given greater visibility and support.

A TEST OF "EQUAL TO EQUAL" REALISM

By making Rabat his first foreign destination and by travelling with a broad ministerial delegation, P.M Sebastien Lecornu is betting that the time is right to formalise what many in both capitals describe as a return to "strategic realism". The France/Morocco relationship is no longer framed as a former protectorate and its former protecting power, but as two partners with shared history, dense economic ties, overlapping security interests and a vast human community living between both shores.

The Rabat meetings will not, on their own, erase years of mistrust or the emotional oscillation between passion and frustration that often characterizes this bilateral story.

However, if the High Joint Commission delivers concrete progress on Airbus, Veolia, Engie and other dossiers, and if the new friendship treaty is indeed signed during H.M Mohammed VI's next visit to Paris, this mid-July trip may be remembered as the moment when France and Morocco finally agreed to rewrite their story, not as an "old couple" constantly on the verge of rupture, but as two strategic partners learning to speak, at last, the language of equals.

Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-27031/rabat-1stpm-sebastien-lecornus-maiden-foreign-trip-signals-a-good-bilateral-sign.html>

Editorial office and responsibility:

V.i.S.d.P. & Sect. 6 MDStV (German Interstate Media Services Agreement): RACHDI Rahma, Jedic Foster

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Editorial program service of General News Agency:

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contact (at) unitedpressagency.com
Official Federal Reg. No. 7442619