



A U.S. military transport aircraft stands at Camp Victory near Baghdad International Airport on Tuesday in Baghdad, Iraq

Joy mixed with fear as US forces depart Iraq

BY AHMED RASHEED, MUAYAD HAMEED AND MAHER NAZEH
Reuters

BAGHDAD

Iraqis celebrated the departure of U.S. forces after more than two decades of war on Wednesday, though many feared that any security vacuum could increase the power of Iran-backed militias or provide an opening for the return of Islamic State.

The withdrawal of the final troops, mainly from an airbase in Erbil in the semi-autonomous Kurdish region, ended the biggest U.S. war of the century, which brought widespread devastation and chaos from which Iraq has yet to fully emerge.

Iran, which has entrenched its influence in Iraq through allied armed groups and is determined to drive all U.S. forces out of the Middle East, views the U.S. pullout as a triumph for its “axis of resistance” of allied armed groups across the region.

Iraqi troops paraded in vehicles through the streets of Baghdad and the Shi’ite holy city of Najaf to mark the pullout.

The withdrawal “fills our hearts with joy,” said Baghdad resident Ahmed Salah, who said he felt reborn at the age of 70. But he also said it was now time for powerful militia groups to surrender their weapons, “and let the government be the one responsible to protect me and you on the ground, sky and water.”

The pullout was agreed in 2024 under President Joe Biden and carried out by Donald Trump’s administration even as it wages war against Iran next door.

U.S. forces invaded to topple Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003, triggering years of upheaval and chaos. The Americans initially left at the end of 2011 but came back less than three years later to assist Iraqi forces after Islamic State fighters seized a third of Iraq and imposed violent rule.

President Donald Trump said that the United States leaves Iraq with “wonderful” Prime Minister Ali Faleh al-Zaidi, saying in a Truth Social post that he would “hopefully be able to handle things very well.”

More than 4,500 U.S. troops died in Iraq, around twice as many as in the parallel war in Afghanistan. The Iraq Body Count project says more than 200,000 Iraqi civilians were killed.

The Pentagon said the United States and its coalition partners formally concluded “Operation Inherent Resolve” and Washington would continue to provide targeted training and intelligence support to Iraqi partners.

The Iraqis are expected to lead the effort to secure the country, an ally of both Washington and Tehran, and keep the remnants of Islamic State suppressed.

“The end of the international coalition’s mission does not mean the end of our battle

against terrorism, but rather Iraq’s transition to a phase in which it assumes full responsibility for its security and stability,” said Zaidi in a statement.

While the departure of U.S. forces is broadly popular among Iraqis, some worry that security forces trained and funded by the United States still can’t protect the country.

“The lesson from the past two decades is that security vacuums can be extremely dangerous,” said Jassim al-Bahadli, an Iraqi analyst who advises the security forces.

Adil Salman, 45, a high school English teacher, said Iraqis “should not rush to celebrate” the withdrawal.

“Militias still operate outside the state’s control and (Islamic State) still has not disappeared,” he said. “I’m concerned that the U.S. departure could lead to a new period of instability. In the end, people will judge this decision by one thing: whether security remains stable in the coming years.”

Hundreds of supporters of pro-Iranian Iraqi militia groups gathered in Baghdad to celebrate the pullout, chanting “Death to America”.

They carried portraits of Iran’s slain Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, his son Mojtaba, who succeeded him, and top Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, who was killed in a U.S. airstrike on his convoy in Baghdad in 2020.

With U.S. forces present alongside armed groups allied to Iran, Iraq has been caught up in this year’s war.

Of the 18 U.S. service members listed as killed since Trump launched “Operation Epic Fury” alongside Israel in February, seven died in Iraq. The last was an army sergeant who died during the controlled detonation of a drone at a base near Erbil in July.

The withdrawal raises “the possibility that Iran’s proxies will feel increasingly empowered in the absence of a Western military presence. These groups may attempt to expand their role in shaping state policies and consolidating their presence within key institutions,” said Baghdad-based political analyst Ahmed Younis.

Some Iraqi security officials say the U.S. pullout also risks giving new life to Islamic State fighters, who, despite the defeat of their self-proclaimed caliphate nearly a decade ago, retain a sleeper cell network.

The last time the U.S. withdrew, the Iraqi army proved no match for Islamic State: soldiers took off their uniforms and fled when the group captured Mosul, Iraq’s second-largest city, in 2014.

“The most important question now is whether Iraq’s security institutions have prepared a viable Plan B for the post-coalition phase,” said retired Iraqi Army General Mohammed al-Jubouri, who led a brigade in the war against Islamic State.

DOJ forever blocked from prosecuting Olympian in Reflecting Pool case

BY AYSHA BAGCH
USA TODAY

A judge permanently dismissed the Trump administration’s criminal case against Olympic canoeist David Hearn, who was previously charged with vandalizing the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool.

The case had already been dismissed at the request of the U.S. attorney for Washington, DC, Jeanine Pirro. Pirro said in a July 31 court filing that the Justice Department based its indictment on “less than fulsome information” from the Department of the Interior, which has since provided evidence suggesting the damage was caused by flawed installation during a rush to complete renovations ahead of President Donald Trump’s summer “America 250” celebration.

However, that earlier dismissal didn’t prevent the DOJ from bringing the case again.

Lawyers for Hearn asked the District of Columbia Superior Court to block prosecutors from re-charging Hearn, pointing to Trump’s public statements criticizing Pirro for dropping the case and arguing the DOJ has shown a “willingness to seek or reinstate criminal charges to satisfy the President, irrespective of the law or facts.”

Judge Todd E. Edelman wrote in his Oct. 1 order that allowing the DOJ to bring the case again – or even to be able to threaten to do so – “would not account for the exceptional circumstances presented by this case.”

Trump criticized Pirro’s decision to drop the case, demanded she reinstitute it and publicly entertained

firing her for dropping it in the first place, Edelman wrote.

“While all defendants deal with some degree of uncertainty regarding the odds of re-prosecution after a case has been dismissed, Mr. Hearn faces the unique possibility that the government will revive this case – one that it has already announced to be meritless – based on political pressure brought by the President of the United States upon his subordinate officers,” Edelman wrote in his decision.

The Justice Department didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment. The White House referred USA TODAY to multiple social media posts Trump made in August. In them, Trump continued to allege that vandals damaged the pool and said anyone who thinks otherwise “should go back to Law School!”

Lawyers for Hearn said in a statement that the decision is “a victory for the rule of law and for an innocent American seeking justice.”

“This was a miscarriage of justice, and what happened to Mr. Hearn is an outrage that should shock every American,” the lawyers – Norm Eisen, Mary Dohrmann and Steve Levin – added.

Hearn was initially arrested on June 19, although prosecutors didn’t charge him with a felony for two more weeks. In the meantime, Trump publicly weighed in on damage to the Reflecting Pool, which had been under renovation at his direction.

Trump told reporters on June 22 that vandals had damaged the pool, including by making a 350-foot slit running from one end to the other.

“I saw it. They cut it. They cut it very violently. The same thing with the floor. They cut it and then they lifted it. They pulled it. And that’s what it is,” Trump told reporters.

Union report finds CDC has lost third of workforce in past year

BY IRENE WRIGHT
USA TODAY Network via Reuters Connect

Two years into the second Trump Administration, the halls of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta are near unrecognizable.

The agency has been battered by funding cuts, program shutdowns and employee furloughs and layoffs, creating uncertainty about the future for one of the world’s leading health organizations.

Now, some scientists, administrators and staff are choosing to remove themselves from the equation.

Between March 2025 and May 2026, the CDC’s overall workforce has decreased by 30%,

stretching across divisions, offices and job fields, according to a new report from the American Federation of Government Employees, a union representing CDC workers.

But rather than changes coming from the top, and Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., many employees are choosing to leave on their own.

HUNDREDS OF CDC EMPLOYEES LEAVE AGENCY IN LAST YEAR

Over the course of 14 months, an estimated 3,539 “separations” took place within the agency, accounting for layoffs, retirements and those who quit.

It brought the estimated workforce from 12,705 employees to just 9,166,

the union said.

When adding in those who have been placed on administrative leave and are not working, but have not yet been fully let go, there is a total 30% reduction in the workforce, leaving 8,895 active employees.

Nearly half of employees lost left on their own terms. A total of 857 employees took voluntary retirement during that period, while another 837 employees quit.

Another 642 employees were terminated or their appointments expired, the union said. A combined 843 employees were considered “RIF-affected,” or those who were impacted by “reduction in force” actions.

On top of that, 216 employees opted for an early retirement to leave the CDC.

“This is not normal,” the AFGE Local 2883 said. “CDC lost staff at more than 1.5 (time) the federal rate over the same period.”

Here are the top five centers with the largest workforce losses:

- Office of Human Resources: 320 employees, 98% of workforce
- National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health: 312 employees, 30% of workforce
- National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion: 303 employees, 48% of workforce
- Global Health Center: 301 employees, 28% of workforce
- National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases: 281 employees, 17% of workforce

China carves new military presence in Southeast Asian neighbour

BY POPPY MCPHERSON, GREG TORODE AND JOSH SMITH
Reuters

China’s latest expansion of its overseas military footprint was carved from a patch of farmland in Laos over the past year, satellite imagery showed, as analysts said the new support centre could deepen Beijing’s presence in Southeast Asia.

The China-Laos Joint Support and Training Center and the China-Laos Friendship Aviation Academy are now operational at an airport in Ban Keun, about 31 miles north of the Lao capital Vientiane, Beijing’s Ministry of National Defence said.

“The fact that this is a joint support and training centre suggests (China’s People’s Liberation Army) could be seeking persistent access to a logistics hub that can support forces rotating through Laos, perhaps with a small forward support element,” said Rachel Vandenbrink, a senior analyst at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

Some records indicate the area was once used by the United States during its war in Laos and neighbouring Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1960s and 1970s. But commercial satellite imagery reviewed by Reuters shows the new construction goes far beyond the rough dirt strip visible until last year.

Work began on the new airfield in late 2025, according to the satellite imagery. As of early this month work was ongoing. In place of green fields, a large paved runway and a

parallel taxiway and apron were visible, along with a number of new buildings.

The Laos Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not respond to questions, and China’s statement did not provide details of what personnel, equipment or facilities would be based at the airport.

The facility will be used for training air force pilots and was “not directed against any third party,” the Chinese defence ministry said.

China operates another joint training and support centre at Cambodia’s Ream naval base on the Gulf of Thailand, and a logistics base in Djibouti. Cambodia says no Chinese personnel or warships are based permanently at Ream.

“Unlike Ream Naval Base, this military logistics base in Laos is more ostensibly similar to the one in Djibouti,” Collin Koh, a security scholar at Singapore’s S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, wrote in a post on the social media platform X. “It may not be wrong to conclude this is the first full-fledged PLA overseas base in Southeast Asia.”

Laos, an impoverished one-party state ruled by the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, has a long and complex history with its fellow communist neighbours in China and Vietnam.

Its air force is small and operates a handful of aircraft designed by China and Russia.

Lao troops have typically needed to travel to Vietnam, Russia, and China for advanced training, but now some can be trained

at home, said a diplomat from a Southeast Asian country who spoke on condition of anonymity.

China has been expanding its military presence across the region, the diplomat added, citing a joint munitions factory in Indonesia.

Laos has carried out joint military exercises with China, including one aimed at humanitarian response this month. In June, Lao President Thongloun Sisoulith visited Beijing for meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping, who called for a strategic dialogue on a number of issues including national defence.

The United States, which operates an expansive network of its own overseas bases, has watched Chinese moves with suspicion. Last year the Pentagon issued an annual report that listed 22 countries where Beijing had plans for military facilities, though Laos was not among them.

Thailand, a U.S. treaty ally that shares a long border with Laos, considers itself a close partner of both Laos and China and sees it as Vientiane’s sovereign right to decide whether to grant permission for a Chinese base, said Rear Admiral Surasant Kongsiri, Thailand’s Ministry of Defence spokesperson.

“Nevertheless, Thailand will continue to closely monitor developments and how the matter proceeds, particularly with regard to building mutual trust,” he added.

Regional military attaches and analysts have long said China lacks an adequate network of military bases given its ongoing military modernisation and perceived need to project power to compete with the U.S.

Vandenbrink said it was unclear what military power China could project from Laos that it could not already do from its own southern province of Yunnan.

“At Ban Keun, the more immediate significance may be China’s ability to establish a persistent military presence and deepen its institutional relationship with the Lao armed forces,” she said.

China opened its Djibouti base in 2017 and has been gradually expanding its presence with extensive ship berthing and surveillance capabilities. The Pentagon has previously estimated it held 400 Marines.

Though extensive, the facility is surrounded by bases from other militaries, including Japan and the U.S.

Beyond Djibouti and Cambodia, China also has three island bases – complete with military-grade runways 3 km long – on Fiery Cross, Mischief and Subi reefs in the Spratly islands of the disputed South China Sea.

Developed since 2014, the facilities now contain wharves, extensive surveillance and air defence installations as well as housing.

Military attaches say the bases have allowed China to significantly expand its naval, coast guard and fishing militia deployments deep into the maritime heart of Southeast Asia. So far, however, it has yet to base jet fighters permanently in the Spratlys, possibly due to the harsh maritime environment.