

# Pentagon chief in Iraq says US wants to ‘strengthen’ ties

Baghdad (AFP) – Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin said Tuesday he hoped to “strengthen and broaden” relations with Iraq, on a Baghdad visit ahead of the 20th anniversary of the US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein.

Defense Secretary Austin also told Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani that US troops were “ready to remain” in the country at Baghdad’s invitation, a thorny issue that has divided public opinion in both countries.

The visit, which had not been publicly announced in advance, comes ahead of the March 20 anniversary of the ground invasion that started two decades of bloodshed which Iraq is only now beginning to exit.

“I am optimistic about the future of our partnership,” Austin told reporters in Baghdad after meetings with Sudani and Iraqi Defence Minister Thabet al-Abbasi.

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