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After the study group...

The Iraq Study Group report's recommendation to withdraw combat troops has long been a White House goal. Since late October, US commanders and Iraqi officials have been working aggressively to hand over all 18 Iraqis provinces to the Iraqi government by sometime in 2007.

However, the Iraq Study Group's wish to wrap up the training of Iraq's security forces by early 2008 is wistful. The report ignores the realities of Iraq's defense and interior ministries, where sectarian pressures are undermining efforts to create a professional military class. In fact, a speedy handover could very well lead to the country's fragmentation. Soldiers might be trained, but if the ministry is held hostage to sectarian passions, the impact of US advisors will probably be limited.

Moves for a rapid transfer of security responsibilities raise the possibility that the Americans are less concerned with creating a just society for all Iraqis than cutting a deal with the country's Shia majority. A recent report in *The Washington Post* suggested officials within the Bush administration were arguing to court Iraq's Shia and abandon the Sunnis.

The US embassy has been reaching out to elements of Iraq's Sunni insurgency since last winter. Since late 2005, it has pressured Iraq's Shia elite to make greater room for the Sunnis in the government. The embassy's efforts have turned US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad into a loathed figure among the Shia. They have taken to calling him Abu Omar – a reference to an early Muslim Caliph despised by them.

For their part, Shia government officials have hinted they want a long-term partnership with the Americans. They have suggested the Shia would forsake Iran for a strategic alliance with the United States.

“What I understand from the atmosphere inside the (Shia) alliance is most of them prefer a special relationship with America than Iran. Believe me no one trusts Iran – even those who get money from them. They are not stable. They put their own interests over everything,” MP Sami al-Askari, an advisor to Premier Nouri al-Maliki, told me last week.

Such a pact could be a way for the Americans to win some passable form of stability and clear the way for long-sought troop withdrawals.

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