

What is Wrong With the Americans?

Sheik Answar al-Asi doesn't think the Americans get it. "Is this the peace that the Americans promised us? The situation is bad and its getting worst." Academics who specialize in Iraq are fond of the phrase "the shadow society". The theory says there is a small group of influential families who rule Iraq socially and economically regardless of who rules politically. They are a tight knit class that has survived the Ottoman and British Empires, the Hashemite monarchy and the various dictators who have come in their place. Sheikh Answar al-Asi is a prominent member of the "shadow society". He is known as the "Emir of the Arabs". al-Asi is the top man in a hierarchical pyramid of tribes that gives allegiance to one leader above a large collection of families, clans and larger tribal groupings. He is the perfect man to try and get an answer to the question – why is the American presence in Iraq failing? Al-Asi's house is sixty kilometers north east of Tikrit in the middle of the Sunni triangle. The countryside looks like nothing has changed in a thousand years. In the semi desert plain herds of sheep still graze: papyrus reeds choke every fresh water pond: and palm trees dot the horizon. Beside the road are the remains of a downed U.S. missile. Inside the house is a long reception room, where, like Jesus's dining hall, people are seated depending on their status. Around the coffee pot and door are the servants: in the middle of the hall the petitioners: and towards the end the Sheikh and his counselors. After a lunch served in traditional style – big common plates of meat and rice all eaten with the hands – the Sheikh gets down to business. "Where are the contracts that the Americans have promised us? Everything in this country is built by someone else, some foreign company. Why would we help them if they do not share the wealth of our own country?" Al-Asi describes Iraqis like children outside a candy store gazing in the window anxious and envious but unable to touch any of the candy. He is also dismissive of the claims that if the Americans were to leave there would be civil war. "Look we have lived together for a thousand years. We know each other. I know all of the top Kurdish and Turocoman leaders. And we know how to settle our differences. There is more going on in Iraq than the United States understands. They should go. We will reach agreements peacefully." It is an opinion you hear often in this northern region of Iraq. Many people in the Arab community were supporters - either tacitly or overtly - of Saddam Hussein. But now even people who may not have supported the last regime wonder why the Americans have come. Jumillah Hussein lives in Kirkuk, her brother was blown up by an Islamic suicide bomber but even she criticizes the American presence here. "The Americans are crazy. Crazy. They go everywhere in convoys. And then bang, bang. They shot. They kill innocent people. Then it is "I am sorry." Sorry! What is the use of "sorry" when they have killed so many people?" It is a perplexing question. Why has the American Army performed so inadequately in Iraq? Why has the strongest army in the world been unable to control groups of badly armed militias who have no heavy artillery, no anti-tank weapons and no body armour?

Speaking with a group of private security contractors. ("I hate the word mercenary." Says one young South African officer, "We are not mercenaries. We are security guards. If we were not here, what would happen? There would be anarchy. Who would stop the looters?" It is hard not to agree. In April and May of last year – anything and everything that could be stolen, was stolen. Offices, factories, stores were pillaged. The roads were ripped up so that looters could steal the copper inside the phone lines. Houses were destroyed so looters could take the bricks.) These men have fought in dozens of different

conflicts around the world. It would be difficult to find a group so experienced in fighting wars. So it is a dangerous sign when they feel that the American Army has fought this particular war all wrong. "If you really want to win a war like this. You must do foot patrols. You must send your troops through the toughest neighbourhoods in the city three, four times a day." Says one former Rhodesian army veteran who fought in the guerrilla war against Mugabee's forces in the late 1970s. "You cannot get good intelligence driving by in a Humvee. You have to show that you are afraid of nothing. Yes, you will take casualties but in the long run far fewer than they are now. It is not just a question of hearts and minds but showing that you are the toughest people around." Jean-Paul Satre wrote of the "other". (*L'autre c'est l'enfer.*) Or the creation of an enemy that is something alien and utterly distinct from oneself. The Americans, strangely, do that. Every Iraqi, both friend and foe, are "the other". It is partly understandable. To protect themselves, the Americans live in fortified compounds. Inside these compounds they watch Fox TV, follow basketball play offs and lift weights. They are islands of mini-America. To visit them is to return instantly to the United States. Everything outside blends in together. Iraqis become one homogenous group, without difference or distinction. The young Iraqis who work inside strive hard to become imitation Americans. They dress in jeans and sweat shirts. They talk in slangy voices. And they dream of leaving for the United States in the next few months. (They of all the people here are in danger. The Feyhadeen - Saddam Hussein's secret service - put up posters all over Kirkuk. "Wanted Dead - 2,000\$ for each Iraqi translator who works for the US forces.") But in the long run this creation of the "other" is the American army's greatest weakness. Iraq is a divided society. There are myriads of factions, groups and social castes. Falluja is a tribal city. Kill one person there, and three hundred other members of their tribe are duty bound to try and kill you. The American forces simply do not seem to have understood the reality of Iraq and so they shuttle around from armed compound to armed compound unaware of the conditions around them. A small example of this ignorance. It is popular to blame any military setback on the lack of weapons or defence systems. Casualties in a riot? Better body armour. Troops attacked in roadside ambush? Heavy armour on the Humvees. However, a solution that would go far further in reducing animosity towards the American troops would be the introduction of a slip on shoe. The floors of most Middle Eastern homes are considered special. Visitors take off their shoes outside the door. Once inside they walk carefully and never display the soles of their feet. Going around with American troops on house searches is to see them always entering houses in heavy military boots laced up to the knees. It is the rough equivalent of mooning your host. Imagine if Iraqi troops were on civil defence duties in the middle of St. Louis, Missouri and every time they entered a house they dropped their trousers to the owner of the house. How can they be popular if they continue to do that? It is not as if the Americans could not develop a shoe that could serve their troops well, but not insult their hosts. This is, after all, the military that has developed "smart bombs", precision missiles and meals ready to eat. But until they become more aware of the culture that surrounds them, they will be forever at odds with the Iraqis.