**By George Friedman**

With U.S. President Barack Obama's announcement of his strategy in Afghanistan, the U.S.-jihadist war has entered a new phase. With its allies, the United States has decided to increase its focus on the Afghan war while continuing to withdraw from Iraq. Along with focusing on Afghanistan, it follows that there will be increased Western attention on Pakistan. Meanwhile, the question of what to do with Iran remains open, and is in turn linked to U.S.-Israeli relations. The region from the Mediterranean to the Hindu Kush remains in a war or near-war status. In a fundamental sense, U.S. strategy has not shifted under Obama: The United States remains in a spoiling-attack state.

As we have discussed, the primary U.S. interest in this region is twofold. The first aspect is to prevent the organization of further major terrorist attacks on the United States. The second is to prevent al Qaeda and other radical Islamist groups from taking control of any significant countries.

U.S. operations in this region mainly consist of spoiling attacks aimed at frustrating the jihadists' plans rather than at imposing Washington's will in the region. The United States lacks the resources to impose its will, and ultimately doesn't need to. Rather, it needs to wreck its adversaries' plans. In both Afghanistan and Iraq, the primary American approach consists of this tack. That is the nature of spoiling attacks. Obama has thus continued the Bush administration's approach to the war, though he has shifted some details.

**The Jihadist Viewpoint**

It is therefore time to consider the war from the jihadist point of view. This is a difficult task given that the jihadists do not constitute a single, organized force with a command structure and staff that could express that view. It is compounded by the fact that al Qaeda prime, our term for the original al Qaeda that ordered and organized the attacks on 9/11 and in Madrid and London, is now largely shattered.

While bearing this in mind, it must be remembered that this fragmentation is both a strategic necessity and a weapon of war for jihadists. The United States can strike the center of gravity of any jihadist force. It naturally cannot strike what doesn't exist, so the jihadist movement has been organized to deny the United States that center of gravity, or command structure which, if destroyed, would leave the movement wrecked. Thus, even were Osama bin Laden killed or captured, the jihadist movement is set up to continue.

So although we cannot speak of a jihadist viewpoint in the sense that we can speak of an American viewpoint, we can ask this question: If we were a jihadist fighter at the end of 2009, what would the world look like to us, what would we want to achieve and what might we do to try to achieve that?

We must bear in mind that al Qaeda began the war with a core strategic intent, namely, to spark

revolutions in the Sunni Muslim world by overthrowing existing regimes and replacing them with jihadist regimes. This was part of the jihadist group's long-term strategy to recreate a multinational Islamist empire united under al Qaeda's interpretation of Shariah.

The means toward this end involved demonstrating to the Muslim masses that their regimes were complicit with the leading Christian power, i.e., the United States, and that only American backing kept these Sunni regimes in power. By striking the United States on Sept. 11, al Qaeda wanted to demonstrate that the United States was far more vulnerable than believed, by extension demonstrating that U.S. client regimes were not as powerful as they appeared. This was meant to give the Islamic masses a sense that uprisings against Muslim regimes not dedicated to Shariah could succeed. In their view, any American military response — an inevitability after 9/11 — would further incite the Muslim masses rather than intimidate them.

The last eight years of war have ultimately been disappointing to the jihadists, however. Rather than a massive uprising in the Muslim world, not a single regime has been replaced with a jihadist regime. The primary reason has been that Muslim regimes allied with the United States decided they had more to fear from the jihadists than from the Americans, and chose to use their intelligence and political power to attack and suppress the jihadists. In other words, rather than trigger an uprising, the jihadists generated a strengthened anti-jihadist response from existing Muslim states. The spoiling attacks in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as in other countries in the Horn of Africa and North Africa, generated some support for the jihadists, but that support has since diminished and the spoiling attacks have disrupted these countries sufficiently to make them unsuitable as bases of operation for anything more than local attacks. In other words, the attacks tied the jihadists up in local conflicts, diverting them from operations against the United States and Europe.

Under this intense pressure, the jihadist movement has fragmented, though it continues to exist. Incapable of decisive action at the moment, it has goals beyond surviving as a fragmented entity, albeit with some fairly substantial fragments. And it is caught on the horns of a strategic dilemma.

Operationally, jihadists continue to be engaged against the United States. In Afghanistan, the jihadist movement is relying on the Taliban to tie down and weaken American forces. In Iraq, the remnants of the jihadist movement are doing what they can to shatter the U.S.-sponsored coalition government in Baghdad and further tie down American forces by attacking Shiites and key members of the Sunni community. Outside these two theaters, the jihadists are working to attack existing Muslim governments collaborating with the United States — particularly Pakistan — but with periodic attacks striking other Muslim states.

These attacks represent the fragmentation of the jihadists. Their ability to project power is limited. By default, they have accordingly adopted a strategy of localism, in which their primary intent is to strike existing governments while simultaneously tying down American forces in a hopeless attempt to stabilize the situation.

The strategic dilemma is this: The United States is engaged in a spoiling action with the primary aim of creating conditions in which jihadists are bottled up fighting indigenous forces rather than

being free to plan attacks on the United States or systematically try to pull down existing regimes. And the current jihadist strategy plays directly into American hands. First, the attacks recruit Muslim regimes into deploying their intelligence and security forces against the jihadists, which is precisely what the United States wants. Secondly, it shifts jihadist strength away from transnational actions to local actions, which is also what the United States wants. These local attacks, which kill mostly Muslims, also serve to alienate many Muslims from the jihadists.

The jihadists are currently playing directly into U.S. hands because, rhetoric aside, the United States cannot regard instability in the Islamic world as a problem. Let's be more precise on this: An ideal outcome for the United States would be the creation of stable, pro-American regimes in the region eager and able to attack and destroy jihadist networks. There are some regimes in the region like this, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The probability of creating such stable, eager and capable regimes in places like Iraq or Afghanistan is unlikely in the extreme. The second-best outcome for the United States involves a conflict in which the primary forces battling — and neutralizing — each other are Muslim, with the American forces in a secondary role. This has been achieved to some extent in Iraq. Obama's goal is to create a situation in Afghanistan in which Afghan government forces engage Taliban forces with little or no U.S. involvement. Meanwhile, in Pakistan the Americans would like to see an effective effort by Islamabad to suppress jihadists throughout Pakistan. If they cannot get suppression, the United States will settle for a long internal conflict that would tie down the jihadists.

**A Self-Defeating Strategy**

The jihadists are engaged in a self-defeating strategy when they spread out and act locally. The one goal they must have, and the one outcome the United States fears, is the creation of stable jihadist regimes. The strategy of locally focused terrorism has proved ineffective. It not only fails to mobilize the Islamic masses, it creates substantial coalitions seeking to suppress the jihadists.

The jihadist attack on the United States has failed. The presence of U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan has reshaped the behavior of regional governments. Fear of instability generated by the war has generated counteractions by regional governments. Contrary to what the jihadists expected or hoped for, there was no mass uprising and therefore no counter to anti-jihadist actions by regimes seeking to placate the United States. The original fear, that the U.S. presence in Iraq and Afghanistan would generate massive hostility, was not wrong. But the hostility did not strengthen the jihadists, and instead generated anti-jihadist actions by governments.

From the jihadist point of view, it would seem essential to get the U.S. military out of the region and to relax anti-jihadist actions by regional security forces. Continued sporadic and ineffective action by jihadists achieves nothing and generates forces with which they can't cope. If the United States withdrew, and existing tensions within countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia or Pakistan were allowed to mature undisturbed, new opportunities might present themselves.

Most significantly, the withdrawal of U.S. troops would strengthen Iran. The jihadists are no friends of Shiite Iran, and neither are Iran's neighbors. In looking for a tool for political

mobilization in the Gulf region or in Afghanistan absent a U.S. presence, the Iranian threat would best serve the jihadists. The Iranian threat combined with the weakness of regional Muslim powers would allow the jihadists to join a religious and nationalist opposition to Tehran. The ability to join religion and nationalism would turn the local focus from something that takes the jihadists away from regime change to something that might take them toward it.

The single most powerful motivator for an American withdrawal would be a period of open quiescence. An openly stated consensus for standing down, in particular because of a diminished terrorist threat, would facilitate something the Obama administration wants most of all: a U.S. withdrawal from the region. Providing the Americans with a justification for leaving would open the door for new possibilities. The jihadists played a hand on 9/11 that they hoped would prove a full house. It turned into a bust. When that happens, you fold your hand and play a new one. And there is always a hand being dealt so long as you have some chips left.

The challenge here is that the jihadists have created a situation in which they have defined their own credibility in terms of their ability to carry out terrorist attacks, however poorly executed or counterproductive they have become. Al Qaeda prime's endless calls for action have become the strategic foundation for the jihadists: Action has become an end in itself. The manner in which the jihadists have survived as a series of barely connected pods of individuals scattered across continents has denied the United States a center of gravity to strike. It has also turned the jihadists from a semi-organized force into one incapable of defining strategic shifts.

The jihadists' strategic dilemma is that they have lost the 2001-2008 phase of the war but are not defeated. To begin to recoup, they must shift their strategy. But they lack the means for doing so because of what they have had to do to survive. At the same time, there are other processes in play. The Taliban, which has even more reason to want the United States out of Afghanistan, might shift to an anti-jihadist strategy: It could liquidate al Qaeda, return to power in Afghanistan and then reconsider its strategy later. So, too, in other areas.

From the U.S. point of view, an open retreat by the jihadists would provide short-term relief but long-term problems. The moment when the enemy sues for peace is the moment when the pressure should be increased rather than decreased. But direct U.S. interests in the region are so minimal that a more distant terrorist threat will be handled in a more distant future. As the jihadists are too fragmented to take strategic positions, U.S. pressure will continue in any event.

Oddly enough, as much as the United States is uncomfortable in the position it is in, the jihadists are in a much worse position.