July 2015 witnessed the signing of an historic nuclear deal between the permanent five (P5) plus Germany and Iran concerning the latter’s acquiescence in giving up its efforts to produce nuclear weapons in return for a gradual phasing out of economic and military sanctions put on Iran by the international community. The implementation of the deal, pending its approval by the US Congress, will shake up the foreign and security policy dynamics in the Middle East as well as globally. In this regard it is important to position the debate on the merits of the deal into an academic context by highlighting the alternative foreign policy imperatives at play. Such a discussion warrants attention particularly in the context of the debate held in the United States. As of today, it seems that there exist two competing schools of thought in Washington, the so-called realists and pragmatists on the one hand and the neoconservatives and liberal interventionists on the other. Though it would be wrong to cluster all realists and pragmatists in one camp and neoconservatives and liberal interventionists in another, the discussion held on the merits of the deal reveals strong parallels between realists and pragmatists on one hand and neoconservatives and liberal interventionists on the other.

Realism in its essence contends that the external environment at a particular time should be taken as given and foreign policy should reflect policy re-adjustments to external factors. The manner in which other actors are administrated internally should not affect the way they are dealt with strategically. What matters in international relations and foreign policy is the ability to materialize previously defined national interests by engaging foes and friends alike strategically and instrumentally. The transformation of others in one’s own self-image should be discarded outright. Similarly, the engagement of other actors should not be kept hostage to permanent ideational and ideological standpoints. Long-term friendships, rivalries and enmities based on ideational viewpoints, emotions and intersubjectively shared values should not color the way decision makers formulate national interests and engage other actors. Peace and stability in the system should be sought in the distribution of material capabilities among actors as well as maintaining a sustainable balance of power.

Realism does not deny the significance of ideational factors and moral considerations in fore-
ign policy. Their salience in the formulation of national preferences and the implementation of policies abroad should be subjected to the instrumental calculation of whether this would add up to the power capabilities and strategic influence of actors abroad. What realists find wrong and imprudent is the designation of external actors as friend or foes based on their values and ideological attributes. The military should not be put in jeopardy in the service of promoting national values abroad unless there is a concrete contribution to the national well-being measured objectively and materially. Promoting democracy for the sake of democratic values should be avoided.

From the realist perspective, the reasons as to why the Obama administration signed the nuclear deal with Iran and is now pressing Congress to approve it becomes conspicuously clear. The goal is not to pave the way for the transformation of the Iranian regime. Instead, the goal is to help midwife a particular regional environment in the Middle East, based on sustainable balance of power among key stakeholders, so that key American interests are achieved cost-effectively.

The key American interests in the Middle East are to help preserve Israel’s territorial security, particularly against the dangers that might emanate from a nuclear Iran, maintain the flow of oil to international markets at reasonable prices, contribute to the strengthening of the internal legitimacy of key American allies in the region, particularly in the context of emerging existential threats from the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), achieve a sustainable balance of power in Iraq and Syria so that no American ground troops be deployed there, and incorporate the Iranian regime into regional politics as a responsible stakeholder so that solutions to existing problems across the region can be achieved sooner than later, if possible without risking further military confrontations among the key regional actors.

Realists of different persuasions argue that the most important question confronting the United States is how to handle the negative consequences of China’s rise as a global power on the United States’ strategic predominance in East Asia and across the globe. Therefore, pivoting towards Asia seems to be the foremost strategy of the United States. For this to happen, the United States should gradually scale down its strategic engagement in other locations in order to devote the bulk of its material capabilities towards East Asia. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have come at an enormous cost to money lives. Rather than contributing to the emergence of a friendly regional environment in the greater Middle East, the US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan proved the futility of putting ideological considerations at the center of American foreign policy. Promoting democracy and engineering regime transformation at the point of a gun have not yielded expected outcomes. Realist argued that Obama has been right not to adopt an ideological approach during the course of the so-called Arab Spring. Though realists argued against a hasty American withdrawal from these theaters before internal order and stability were re instituted, they supported the adoption of pragmatic and custom-made policies towards the Middle East from the onset of the Arab Spring. According to realists no particular crisis in the Middle East warrants the deployment of American troops to the region. What needs to be done is to outsource the task of finding solutions to the
problems in the region to regional actors as well as urging the European allies to contribute more resources.

Realists do not underestimate the risks of Iran’s rising influence in the post-Arab Spring Middle East and think that traditional allies in the region need to be strengthened in such a way as to help counter-balance Iran. To achieve this, Iran should be prevented from getting nuclear weapons technology as well as pursuing aggressive and assertive policies in the region based on sectarian policies. That said, signing a nuclear agreement with Iran to this end and helping create the conditions for its re-entry into the region as a responsible actor and one that could potentially contribute to the solution of regional problems, particularly the festering crises in Iraq and Syria, appears to be a strategically correct and prudent strategy. Prioritizing the adoption of militarily coercive strategies and threatening the Iranian rulers with potential regime change, as have been continuously and ferociously preached by the hawkish Israeli Prime Minister and neoconservative circles in the United States, would not only cause unbearable humanitarian and financial burdens but also risk the acceleration of Iranian attempts across the Middle East at further diminishing what has been left of the American influence in the region.

Rather than acquiescing in perpetuating Iran’s regional influence and catapulting Tehran to the position of Washington’s most trustable security partner in the Middle East, the post-nuclear deal policies of the Obama administration suggest that the United States has defined the formation and maintenance of a sustainable balance of power in the region as the closest way to long term stability in the Middle East. Signing lucrative military agreements with Sunni monarchies in the Gulf region, continuously reassuring the skeptical allies of the continuation of American commitment to their security, initialing the Incirlik deal with Turkey, encouraging the return of General Sisi’s Egypt to Middle Eastern power games as a stronghold of the so-called Sunni camp, urging Israel to adopt milder positions on the opening to Iran and intensifying diplomatic efforts to reach a solution to the crisis in Syria can all be seen as parts of a well-crafted realist strategy to help bring into existence a stable regional order based on balance of power.

In contrast the realist thinking mentioned above, the so-called neoconservatives and liberal interventionists argue that the regime in Iran cannot be trusted for it takes its legitimacy from the religious zeal of promoting Shiite ideology across the Middle East and putting the efforts of demonizing the United States and Israel at the center of its foreign policy. To them, Iran is still more an ideology than a state that acts on the basis of irreconcilable ideational differences between the West and Islamic world. Just as the Islamic State is putting existential threats to the western led regional order from an extremist religious perspective, Iran is doing the same from a less extremist perspective. Just as the neo-conservatives supported the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan from an identity-related perspective, they are now vociferously arguing against the deal with Iran from a similar mentality. There is only one way to help protect American foreign and security policy interests across the globe; maintaining American hegemony in each and every part of the planet on the basis of unrivalled military power and the promotion of American values at the point of a gun.
Leaving aside the task of demonstrating the paucity of such neoconservative thinking to another time, it would suffice to underline here that neither the evolving power dynamics in the Middle East and across the globe nor the internal dynamics in the United States will allow the neoconservative and liberal interventionist circles to return to the driving seat of decision making in Washington anytime soon.

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**About BILGESAM**

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