

Democracy, Deconstruction, and Islam

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The focus of this presentation is the critical relationship between democracy and Islam. While there are many complex issues to be explored in the very broad topic of democracy and Islam, I will focus primarily on two: 1) clarifying the theoretical differences between democratic and Islamic conceptions of sovereignty and 2) bringing to light the critical value of *both* democratic principles for Islamic approaches to the state and law (*shari'a*) *and* Islamic principles for reforming western liberal democracies. By focusing on these two issues I aim to cut across two of the most common threads of popular discourse that are particularly apparent in the United States' political and diplomatic relations to Islam in general and Islamic states in particular. On the one hand, I call into question the apparently progressive claim that there is no opposition between western democratic principles and Islam. On the other hand, I highlight and critique the parochial presupposition that the direction of enlightenment can only proceed one way, i.e. from the West and toward the Orient. A failure to understand and confront the subtle, but very real, differences between democratic and Islamic political principles has led not only to theoretical ignorance on both sides, but has, I argue, contributed to the abandoning of politics in favor of coercive sanctions and armed conflict.