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Letters: Engaging the Muslim Brotherhood

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"I never thought you were a bad consigliere, Tom. I thought Santino was a bad don."

Like the consigliere to the Corleone crime family in *The Godfather*, Lynch gives sound advice to the supreme guide of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. But what good is sound advice to a bad don? Mohammed Mahdi Akef is an old-guard Muslim Brother who has left behind a trail of anti-American incitement as long as the Nile. He has proclaimed, "We have no relations with the U.S. It is a Satan that abuses the region, lacking all morality and law." The prospect of his becoming America-friendly is nil.

Lynch urges Akef to "demonstrate that, despite many policy differences, you share two fundamental goals with the United States: democracy in Arab countries and curtailing the influence of al Qaeda." But promoting democracy and defeating al Qaeda isn't what Akef sells to his followers—they wouldn't follow him if he did. The Muslim Brotherhood sells Muslim empowerment. It wants the Jews out of "Palestine" (that includes Israel) and the United States out of Egypt, Iraq, and everywhere else. Those "fundamental goals" have kept this movement going for almost 80 years and through trying times. Why should the Brotherhood adopt American goals? And why now? Akef has even stated that he "expect[s] America to collapse soon." Unfortunately, he hears plenty of American "experts" announcing that they expect something similar. Lynch himself slips into double talk when he downgrades the divide to "policy differences." Importantly, Akef doesn't have "ambivalence" toward Hamas terror; he supports it. Lynch also misleads Akef by claiming that there is a debate about engaging the Muslim Brotherhood raging in Washington. There isn't. Because as tough as Hosni Mubarak can be, he shares several "fundamental goals" with the United States: stopping Islamist terror and keeping the Pax Americana.

—Martin Kramer

Wexler-Fromer Fellow

Washington Institute for Near East Policy
Washington, D.C.

Marc Lynch replies:

Joshua Stacher and A. Fahmy both argue that the repressiveness of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, not the Muslim Brotherhood's commitment to democracy, should be the core issue of discussion on Egypt. I agree wholeheartedly with condemning the illiberal practices of a close American ally, but the Egyptian government cannot be the sole focus of critical scrutiny.

The Brotherhood thus far has demonstrated considerable commitment to the democratic game in spite of the regime's crackdown, which has earned it the backing of a wide range of human rights and democracy advocacy groups. But, ultimately, both Egyptians and Americans want to know what the Brotherhood would do if it were actually to come to power—and it is simply wrong to claim that no doubts about its intentions remain. The political party platform that it released

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to a small number of Egyptian intellectuals a few weeks ago, with its references to a religious council with power over legislation, shocked many people and has only exacerbated those doubts.

I agree with Fahmy's suggestion that the real focus should be the rank and file of the Brotherhood—the activists who form the base of the organization. But Mohammed Mahdi Akef is, in fact, the leader of the organization, leaving the Brotherhood open to critiques like that of Martin Kramer. Perhaps Akef's inflammatory statements are simply "red meat" to his base. But does that not tell us something about the views of that base?

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Kramer is right that the Brotherhood supports Hamas and generally opposes U.S. foreign policy. He does a disservice, however, by reducing our vision to those issues at the expense of a wider view of the value of democracy and the need to combat extremism—two goals that many Americans share, and to which the Brotherhood might meaningfully contribute. Finally, Kramer succumbs to his own wishful thinking when he claims there is no debate in Washington about engaging the Brotherhood. My own participation in those debates aside, the evidence against his view can be found in the recent publication of articles exploring this question in the two leading foreign-policy periodicals in the United States: *Foreign Affairs*, with Robert S. Leiken and Steven Brooke's "The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood," and ... **FOREIGN POLICY**.

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