When you took over the reins as head of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2004, promising to put freedom at the top of your agenda, you probably couldn’t have imagined where your organization would be today. Although still technically banned, the Brotherhood has emerged as the leading opposition group in Egypt, with 88 seats in parliament. Your calls for governmental transparency and accountability represent an entirely new battle in Egyptian politics—and you’ve got the scars to prove it.

Since contesting parliamentary elections, you’ve seen the Egyptian regime aggressively tamper with the ballot box, launch a massive campaign of arrests of Brotherhood members, and alter the Constitution to prevent your participation in the political process. Many in the West are concerned about the way you’ve been treated by the Egyptian government. But your continued ambiguity about the Brotherhood’s core political commitments, your ambivalence toward Hamas’s attacks on Israel, and questions about your connections with Islamic extremism have left even your backers doubting your true intentions.

You recently complained that the United States “only knows the language of violence and blood and destruction and doesn’t even offer dialogue as an option.” But today you have a historic opportunity for such a dialogue. Americans now recognize they are losing the war of ideas in the Arab world, that Islamic extremism is on the rise, and that the promotion of democracy in the region has collapsed. A vigorous debate has ensued in Washington about the Muslim Brotherhood. Some now see you as a relatively moderate force and a potential partner in a common struggle for democracy and against Islamic extremism. But many others see you as an enemy to be confronted, your Islamist agenda as a major source of extremism and anti-Americanism.
and your talk of democracy as a deception meant to fool gullible Westerners. How you engage with this debate will have long-lasting repercussions for your relationship with a United States that isn’t leaving the region anytime soon.

If you are sincere about seeking meaningful dialogue with the West, then you must tackle this debate now, while it’s hot. But repeating the same tired slogans isn’t going to cut it. 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. If you truly want to persuade Americans—and other Arabs and Muslims—of the value of engaging with you, here’s how to do it:

Use Your Political Capital: These are difficult times for the Muslim Brotherhood, especially in your home country of Egypt. Many of you are bitter over the hostile Western response to Hamas’s electoral victory in the Palestinian Territories, seeing it as proof that the game is rigged and that no Islamist party will ever really be allowed to win elections. Many Brotherhood members have begun to wonder whether participating in democratic politics is really worth it, especially as al Qaeda and your more radical rivals mock your misfortunes. But it has never been more important for you to remain publicly and energetically committed to the democratic process than right now. Your Western critics want nothing more than for you to abandon democracy in the face of adversity. They will claim that it exposes your true face to the world—just as they did when Hamas seized power in Gaza in June. Treat these difficult times as an opportunity: How you react to the tough moments tells us more about you than how you behave when things are going well.

You’ve done some positive things in this regard already. Your decision to contest this summer’s Shura Council elections, when the regime shut off every chance for you to win, spoke well of your commitment to the democratic game. Your parliamentary bloc has performed remarkably, highlighting issues of corruption and political reform. Such demand for accountability in one of the most repressive countries in the Middle East is courageous, and during the past year, many Western democracy activists and human rights organizations,
such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, have rallied to your defense. But don’t confuse their principled defense of your right to participate with support for your political goals—that would be a grave mistake. Their stance should be taken as the fruit of your years of effort at proving your democratic credentials. Don’t fail the test now.

**Watch What You Say:** You’re the supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood. When you speak, you’re representing the entire organization. When you rail against American plans to dominate the region, you’re erasing dozens of conciliatory statements by your deputies. Although attacking the United States may play well with your membership, it makes it very difficult for Americans interested in exploring a new relationship with the Brotherhood to make their case. Remember, the days are long past when you can target messages to different audiences and expect others not to listen. If anything, Americans pay more attention to what you say in Arabic than to your blandishments in English, as your Arabic statements are more likely to reflect your true attitude. All politics is global now: What you do and say at home will have worldwide repercussions, especially at a time when Americans are scrutinizing your every move for evidence about your real intentions.

Keep in mind, too, that cardinal rule of communication: Know your audience. You don’t need to persuade the hard-line critics or ardent supporters who’ve already made up their minds. Target the middle ground of sensible, pragmatic Americans who believe in democracy, worry about terrorism, and have genuine questions about your commitments to the former and against the latter. Ignore the praise from your fans and the abuse from your enemies, and concentrate on convincing these hopeful skeptics, who want to believe that you can play a constructive role—but who need a lot more proof. Nobody expects you to transform into Western liberals, but most Americans want to see evidence of a principled commitment to basic freedoms—not just for yourselves.
but for all people. American policymakers need to know that you can coexist with secularists and express your disapproval through peaceful, noncoercive means. So emphasize that enfranchisement for you means enfranchisement for every oppositional Egyptian political tendency—including those that reject Islamism. A lot of Egyptian Copts seem unpersuaded by your statements that you see them as full citizens, and many democracy activists privately express deep concerns about your intentions. If you can’t persuade your fellow citizens, who know you best, how can you hope to convince Americans?

Be a Firewall, Not a Transmission Belt: Ultimately, the reason Americans are contemplating turning to you is out of an interest in combating Islamic extremism. You have often said that the Brotherhood rejects violence and rejects revolution, at least within your home country (though your tolerance of such violence in Palestine and Iraq muddies your message). You argue that you do so both out of conviction and out of your own self-interest—to avoid giving justification for regime crackdowns, for instance, or to resist al Qaeda’s efforts to seduce your younger members toward more radical action. But your critics respond that once your organization convinces people to embrace their Muslim identity, they are more likely to join violent movements and take up jihad. What are you really doing to prevent such radicalization from happening? Here’s one way to think about it: The Brotherhood could either be a firewall (“capturing” the hearts and minds of Muslims within a moderate Islamist program and dissuading them from turning to radicalism), or a transmission belt (catapulting Muslims along the path to radicalization). Which are you? If you could demonstrate in practice that your rejection of violence translates into concrete efforts to curtail extremist violence, Americans would be far more willing to take a chance on your political aspirations.

One way to leave little room for misinterpretation would be a vocal, active condemnation of the practice of takfir. This act of declaring another Muslim an infidel—one of the most flagrant forms of radicalism in Sunni Islam—is spreading rapidly. Brotherhood members are not innocent of this practice, despite former Supreme Guide Hasan al-Hudaybi’s
well-known directive to be “preachers, not judges.” Issue a strong statement of the Brotherhood’s stance on the practice of takfir. Will you stand up to those who would pass judgment on their fellow citizens? That is what we in American politics call a litmus test. Not long ago, a Saudi religious authority, Salah al-Fawzoon, reportedly pronounced takfir on liberals. Will you openly and publicly denounce him and defend the freedoms of thought and opinion about which you speak so eloquently? And it’s not enough to just say it once or sign a document; you must enforce this doctrine through the ranks and be willing to criticize members who violate it. This one clarification would go a long way in drawing a sharp line between you and the radicals.

Learn to Let Go: When the young blogger (and Brotherhood member) Abd al-Monem Mahmoud wrote in defense of the anti-Islamist blogger Kareem Amer early this year, activists across the political spectrum took notice of this brave, principled, and unexpected stance. Blogging by your members shouldn’t just be tolerated; it should be encouraged. Let these blogs become public forums in which Brotherhood members and outsiders from all ideological trends can argue about ideas and strategies. It could help energize your own internal thinking, giving new voices a chance to be heard. And it could demystify the Brotherhood and reassure others about your true intentions. Greater transparency in your internal dialogues and decision-making might be difficult at a time when the regime is cracking down hard, but it would help reassure reasonable skeptics. Doing all that would mean giving up a certain amount of control, though, and allowing for a wider margin of internal freedoms. Disenchanted members of the Brotherhood have long complained about the rigidity of the organization and the lack of tolerance for dissent. Can you prove them wrong and allow an internal pluralism that might reassure others of your wider intentions? Or will you cling to a stance that leaves you squarely at odds with one of your most important strategic allies? The choice is yours alone.