In this contribution I discuss three recent publications of prominent Arab intellectuals of various ideological trends. Galal Amin, Muhammad Imara, and Rida Hilal are all prolific authors of carefully published books, and have been regular contributors to the country’s major newspapers for at least a decade. While the economist Galal Amin and the jurist Muhammad Imara continue to be quite productive, the journalist Rida Hilal has not been heard of since he mysteriously disappeared in August 2003. The three publications fall loosely within certain broad trends: “left-wing nationalist,” “Islamic,” and “liberal” respectively. The following exposition highlights a number of common strategies in Arab appreciations and representations of Europe and the West. I argue that the way in which the West is portrayed is to a large extent determined by ideology, and that none of the three ideological trends hold the West to be unequivocally identifiable with the aforementioned lofty ideals.

Galal Amin: unabated Western imperialism

In 2002 the first Arab Human Development Report was published. This UNDP-sponsored report, drafted by a team of prominent Arab scholars and intellectuals, described with great candour the major problems in the contemporary Arab world. While the report was praised by many, some vehemently opposed the report for serving Western interests. Rather than elaborating on what was wrong with the Arab world, the authors had better focused on the oppressive role of external actors. One of the more prominent Arab intellectuals to attack the Report was the Egyptian economist Galal Amin of the American University in Cairo. To Amin, the Report almost constituted treason, since it played and reminded them of the justness of their case.

Amin argues that the Arab and Muslim world is suffering from a global smear campaign. For instance, the “events” of September 11 are thought by many to have been organized by Muslims, while in reality this was not the case. Amin does not elaborate as to who was behind the attacks if not al-Qaeda, though he hints at the likelihood of an “inside-job.” His main aim however, lies in alerting Arabs and Muslims to the smear campaign against them and “re-minding them of the justness of their case.”

Amin rejects everything that does not fit the image of a noble, well-to-do Arab world. To him, the images of plun-
Muhammad Imara: incompatible civilizations

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to so-called “moderate Islamists” or “Islamic reformers,” sometimes also referred to as Islamists of “the middle way,” as distinguished from Wahhabism.9 It has been suggested that this trend has emerged from within Islamic fundamentalism, and that contrary to their radical progenitor, the Islamists of the middle way are willing and able to compete in a liberal democratic setting. Although some have challenged the description, Imara sees the West acting according to a supposed deeply-rooted and unbecoming of its “real” values, and evokes the notion of an ideal, universally desired West. Imara uses the term “the true West” as an umbrella description of the West as a civilization that, since its inception, has opposed the West (or Europe, Christianity, or the Judeo-Christian civilization). Imara portrays the West as a civilization that has never really changed in its position towards the Orient (or Islam, or the Arabs). The West, according to Imara, has always been imperialist: it oppressed “the Orient and the Oriental peoples for ten centuries, from Alexander the Great . . . to the seventh century [Byzantine emperor] Herakleios.”10 All this only ended, Imara explains, when Islam came on the scene and liberated the Orient from Western oppression. From that moment on, the West had been at odds with Islam. This historical narrative serves two purposes. Firstly, it provides the reader with an image of the West as a civilization that, since its inception, has opposed the West (or Europe, Christianity, or the Judeo-Christian civilization). Secondly, and partly as a consequence of the first lesson, there is nothing Muslims can do to alter the bad image that the West has of Islam. The West has exercised its oppression over the Orient before Islam emerged, which is seen as proof that the West will be aggressive towards the Orient regardless of Islam. This point is made elsewhere in the book, when Imara again stresses that the West campaigning against Islam long before 2001, and that clearly September 11 cannot be seen as the justification for Western attacks upon Islam. Imara’s portrayal of the West is different from that of Amin in that Imara focuses more on the idea of a religious conflict, in which the West stands opposed to Islam as a revolutionary religion and as an alternative to Western secular political systems. Though Imara does have economic grievances against the West, he stresses the cultural and civilizational differences between the Western and the Islamic worlds. In this sense his discourse echoes Huntington’s theory of a “clash of civilizations” as well as Bernard Lewis’s representation of the Western and Eastern relations as characterized by parochial conflict.

Rida Hilaq: the West’s double speak

While “the West” has conventionally denoted Europe and North America, ever since the end of World War II it is the United States that has commonly been viewed as its primary component. The liberal intellectual Rida Hilaq goes further and tends not to speak of the West or Westernization, but of America and Americanization. In his recent book Americanization and Islamization,11 Hilaq calls for a marriage of Islam and democracy to take the place of the current situation in which rigid Salafi Islamization is coupled with American consumerism. Interestingly, Hilaq contrasts the current process of Americanization with the pre-WWII process of Europeanization. He argues that whereas the Arab world today is taking but the foam of America, leaving aside its true riches, i.e. its values, the previous age of Europeanization was much more constructive: “Egyptians took from the Europeans the rule of law, constitutionalism, parliament, journalism, theatre, and cinema.”12 The result was that Egypt could vie with the most progressive of the world’s nations, and Cairo could face up to Paris or London. This so-called renaissance-period, Hilaq argues, was eventually frustrated both by British imperialism and by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. This nostalgia for pre-revolutionary Egypt, when Cairo was known by many as “Paris along the Nile,” is common to many liberals in Arab society. A common understanding, not limited to liberals, is that Europe or the West in general contains certain highly commendable qualities with regard to governance and personal freedoms, but that Westerners betray these qualities in their foreign policy towards the Arab and Muslim world. Hilaq claims that for a solution to “the Middle Eastern crisis” to be reached it is merely necessary “that America should honour the American values, most prominently the value of democracy.”13 This is reminiscent of the way in which Arab nationalists from before WWII attacked European colonialism without rejecting the project of cultural and political Europeanization. As Hourani wrote of this disappointment, “When the nationalists condemned British or French policy, the conclusion they drew was that England or France were intrinsically bad but that they were being untrue to themselves.”12

Notes

4. Ibid., 6.
5. Ibid., 10.
8. Ibid., 65–66.
10. Ibid., 33–34.
11. Ibid., 15.