The central focus of Jan-Peter Hartung’s intellectual biography is the life and deeds of Sayyid Abū l-Ḥasan ‘Alī al-Ḥasanī Nadwī, widely known as ‘ʿAlī Mian’. Belonging to a prominent north-Indian family of sharīf descent, ‘ʿAlī Mian followed in the footsteps of his father and elder brother and presided over the Nadwat al-ʿUlamāʾ in Lucknow from the early 1960s to his death in 1999.

Nadwat al-ʿUlamāʾ was founded in the late nineteenth century as the national ‘council of ʿulamāʾ’. Its proclaimed aim had been to counteract the sectarian tendencies increasingly visible within the Indian Muslim communities. Sunni as well as Shiʿī Muslims were to discuss their differences and arrive at a common reforming agenda. But almost from the beginning rifts and exclusions occurred, while ‘traditionalist’ and ‘modernist’ Sunni Muslims struggled to control the council of ʿulamāʾ. In the second decade of its existence the traditionalist faction proved victorious, and ‘ʿAlī Mian’s father took over as the fourth niẓām. Since then the leadership of the Nadwat al-ʿUlamāʾ became institutionalized in this family; ‘ʿAlī Mian’s successor was his nephew Sayyid Muḥammad Rabīʿ al-Ḥasanī Nadwī.

Sayyid Abū l-Ḥasan ‘Alī al-Ḥasanī Nadwī was born into a family with long traditions of both ʿilm and tassawuf. Since the seventeenth century the family had lived in Rae Bareli, a qasba made prominent as the centre of Sayyid Aḥmad Shahid’s early nineteenth-century reform movement, the Ṭarīqa-yi Muḥammadiya. ‘ʿAlī Mian himself followed in the family tradition receiving both the training of an ʿālim and becoming a Sufi follower in a number of ṭarīqas. His teachers tied him not only into the reforming traditions of the Indian subcontinent but also connected him to those of the wider Muslim world. In his own work he was concerned to reach the Arabic-speaking public of west Asia, publishing his texts not only in Urdu and other Indian languages but also in Arabic and English. Throughout his life ‘ʿAlī Mian produced a large corpus of writing. Important works were a biography of Sayyid Aḥmad Shahid and the book entitled What did the world lose through the decline of the Muslims? through which ‘ʿAlī Mian achieved fame and popularity in west Asia in the early 1950s. In drawing on these and other published accounts, especially the seven-volume autobiography as well as separate reports on his travels outside of the subcontinent, Hartung attempts to contextualize these texts and thus outline ‘ʿAlī Mian’s intellectual development and changing strategies to achieve his national and international aims.

What were these aims? Sayyid Abū l-Ḥasan ‘Alī al-Ḥasanī Nadwī’s objectives were two-fold: first, to bring about a ‘true world-wide Muslim community’, umma al-wahidiya, based on a grass-roots missionary conversion movement targeting each individual Muslim. These would then become sources of emulation for non-Muslims. And second, to make the rest of the Muslim world aware of the contribution of India’s Muslims to it. He pursued these aims in both national and international contexts. Nationally, ‘ʿAlī Mian had to respond to the changing understanding of the Indian
Muslim community by others and by itself, the increasing polarization of the population into Hindus and Muslims, the struggles over who was to represent the Muslim communities and how they were going to position themselves within an independent India. Opting to stay in India at Partition, ʿAlī Mian operated within a secular-democratic framework in which he spoke out against any violent-political attempts by the Muslim minority to establish an Islamic state. He took the Tablīghī Jamāʿat as his model, advocating the idea of daʿwa, mission, as a way to champion Islam. ʿAlī Mian shared with the Tablīghī Jamāʿat an emphasis on the revealed sciences and especially the ḥadīth. He rejected thus the ideas of Abū l-Aʿlā Mawdūdī (d. 1979) and Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966) for the establishment of an Islamic political entity. Throughout his time at Nadwat al-ʿUlamāʾ he appointed people who were close to the Tablīghī movement, thus altering the character of the institution.

Politically he emerged on the Indian scene in the late 1970s in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi’s Emergency. The two issues which came to dominate the following decades, and thus his activities were, first, the conflict between Muslim Personal Law and the secular laws of the Indian Civil Code, embodied in the Shāh Bāno controversy, and second the intensifying ‘communal’ clashes instigated by radicalized sections of the Hindu majority community under the auspices of Hindu movements and parties, embodied in the Ayodhyā temple-mosque dispute. In the later issue, ‘Alī Mian held a politically pragmatic position in favour of India’s secular constitution; in the former, however, he insisted on the supremacy of revealed over man-made laws. ʿAlī Mian pursued his positions through direct contact with politicians, through local and national Muslim and ʿulamāʾ associations, and through organizations set up by himself. He came to be seen as a national spokesman for Muslims but was not savvy enough to accumulate the political capital that would have been required to push through his ideas.

Internationally, his efforts concentrated on west Asia. Together with Mawdūdī he was the best-known South Asian Muslim in the Arabic-speaking world. Through his travels in west Asia in the late 1940s and early 1950s, he established contacts in Egypt with members of al-Azhar as well as the Muslim Brotherhood; equally in Saudi Arabia he worked to forge links with important ʿulamāʾ to promote his ideas. He became a member of the Islamic World League and sought the approval of King Faiṣal (d. 1975) for the promotion of his Tablīghī daʿwa ideas. ʿAlī Mian’s highpoint in the Arab world was in the wake of the publication of What did the world lose because of the decline of Muslims? and began to fade from the mid-1970s onwards. Saudi Wahhābisation policies marginalized his more Salafīya-based views.

Jan-Peter Hartung’s book is one of the few biographies of prominent Indian Muslims available in a European language. In its time-frame and topic it follows on from Jamal Malik’s, Islamische Gelehrtenkultur in Nordindien: Entwicklungsgeschichte und Tendenzen am Beispiel von Lucknow (Brill, 1997). The book is structured around three sets of theoretical parameters: network, field, and discourse. It opens up with four thematic discourses: those of reason versus revelation (maʿqulāt versus manqulāt) in Islam, Sufism, Islamic activism: non-conformist and conformist, and Indian