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In their seminal contribution to the literature on political Islam and in particular Islamist militancy, Vahid Brown and Don Rassler present an extremely detailed yet nuanced analytical history of the ‘Haqqani Network,’ one of the most influential, well-entrenched, and lethal actors in the Afghanistan-Pakistan (“AfPak”) theater since the mid-1970s. Unlike the majority of previous book-length studies, Brown and Rassler detail the history and evolution of the group rather than the “Quetta Shura” Taliban. Despite the fact that the Haqqani Network has long been one of the primary forces behind successive insurgencies, the group has not attracted the attention of many researchers, who have instead focused on the originally Qandahar-based Taliban movement. Brown and Rassler have substantially advanced our understanding of the development and diversity of Islamism in Afghanistan, Pakistan, the complex web of relationships and rivalries in these areas, and the history and current trajectories of jihadi groups such as Al-Qa’ida Central.

The book is divided into two parts, the first, which covers the early history of the Haqqani Network and its ideological foundations, written by Brown and the second, which focuses on more contemporary developments including the Network’s location among the array of militant Islamist actors in “AfPak” as well as the local, regional, and global aspects of the Network’s strategy and interests, media, and ideology. The introduction and conclusion are collaboratively written and the book, as a whole, reads rather seamlessly despite the fact that Brown and Rassler wrote their respective sections, generally speaking, independently. In a particularly important finding, Brown documents in Chapter 2 how Jalaluddin Haqqani first made an argument for the individual obligation (fard ‘ayn) of military jihad, years before Abdullah Azzam. Indeed, it is possible, Brown argues, that Jalaluddin’s fatwa influenced Azzam’s later one.
Brown and Rassler draw upon a wealth of primary source documents produced by the Haqqani Network through various stages of its history as well as from other primary sources from other groups, including allied jihadi organizations and U.S. government documents. The authors also draw on Arabic, Pashto, Dari, and Urdu primary documents, films, and other media releases from the Network and other regional jihadi actors such as the ETIP, IMU, and TTP. This wealth of primary source documentation adds significant depth to the book, providing a look into how the Haqqanis have attempted to portray themselves to various constituencies and target audiences.

*Fountainhead of Jihad*, in addition to charting new territory in terms of its analysis of the founding and evolution of the Haqqani Network and the wider “AfPak” jihadi current, is also written in clear and engaging prose. Brown and Rassler have paved new avenues forward for the study of the diverse array of insurgent actors involved in the Afghanistan conflict as well as other regional conflicts in Pakistan, Kashmir, East Turkestan, and the Central Asian republics.