

Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani was born in Persia in 1838 and was of a Shi'ite religious background, though he posed as a Sunni from Afghanistan.¹ His most important intellectual contribution was his advocacy and dissemination of the doctrine of Pan-Islamism. He stressed the importance of Islamic unity to resist European imperialism. Even before his emphasis on Pan-Islamism, he was beginning to play an important role in specific anti-imperialist struggles. For instance, Afghani was a charismatic teacher in Egypt between 1871 and 1879. His most famous pupil was Muhammad Abduh, the future noted Islamic Modernist. Afghani preached the need for resisting the growing British interference in Egyptian affairs. Britain had purchased controlling shares in the Suez Canal in 1875 and participated in the Anglo-French Dual Control over the Egyptian government to insure that the Khedive Isma'il, the ruler of Egypt, would repay his debts. Afghani also stressed the necessity of self-strengthening reforms by Islamic states, which would become a key aspect of Islamic Modernism. He believed in a pure Islam that was in accordance with reason and science. His rationalist interpretation, however, suggests that Afghani may have been a religious skeptic who was more interested in the political utility of Islam.²

It was by the late 1870s that Afghani began to stress Pan-Islamism. The ideology had first arisen in reaction to British imperialism in India and Russian expansion in Central Asia. The Sultans Abdulaziz and Abdulhamid II then began to advocate it as a means to counteract the growing foreign intervention in the Ottoman Empire. Muslims would be reunited under a revived caliphate and engage in jihad or holy war against the foreign intruders. Afghani carried his message into India and later conveyed his ideas by publishing, together with Abduh, the newspaper *The Indissoluble Link (Al-'Urwa Al-Wuthqa)* in Paris in 1884.

Afghani's homeland of Persia was a victim of the Great Game, the Anglo-Russian imperial rivalry in Eurasia in the 19th and early 20th centuries. After a phase of militant, aggressive imperialism at the expense of Persia, the two powers engaged in a race for concessions to gain the upper hand in the country. The Persian government, for instance, granted the British Imperial Tobacco Corporation a 50-year concession in 1890 that gave it a monopoly over the production, distribution, and sale of tobacco in Persia. This concession sparked the Tobacco Concession Protest of 1891-92, from which is dated the national awakening of Persia. It saw the forging of the religious-radical alliance that would also play an important role in the 1905 Persian Constitutional Revolution and the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Afghani instructed his followers in agitational and propagandistic techniques such as letter writing, the use of placards, and demonstrations that were an important part of the protest. His letter, moreover, to the chief leader of the Shi'ite ulema seems to have been an important factor in the latter's declaration of a boycott of tobacco.³ Widespread adherence to the boycott, including women of the harem of Shah Nasir al-Din, who had granted the tobacco monopoly, led to the withdrawal of the concession.

¹ Nikki R. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani"* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 11-12.

² Ibid., pp. 79-80.

³ Ibid., p. 346.

Afghani spent his last years in Istanbul, from whence he inspired the assassination of the Persian shah. Afghani himself died from cancer in 1897. During his lifetime, he not only helped to popularize Pan-Islamism, but also indirectly helped to influence the development of Islamic Modernism with his emphasis on the compatibility of Islam with reason and on the importance of reform. Islamic fundamentalists, on the other hand, have taken as a point of departure his emphasis on a pure Islam. Afghani was willing to encourage nationalism where he found it as a bulwark against European imperialism. Modern Pan-Arabism with its stress on the political unity of Arabs, furthermore, represents a more secular and circumscribed form of his Pan-Islamism. The following selection is taken from a letter by him to an unknown Ottoman official c. 1877-78.⁴

... when I looked at the state of the lofty Ottoman Government in this age, and when I considered the condition of the Islamic nation (*millat-i-islamiyyeh*) it rent the shirt of my patience and I was overcome by fearful thoughts and visions from every side. Like a fearfully obsessed man day and night I have thought of this affair and have made the means of reform and salvation of this *milla* my profession and incantation. In order to find a means of delivery from these terrible difficulties, I have studied the condition of the great deeds that have emanated from individual men which are worthy of strong wonder and awe: Until my attention fell in passing on the life of Abu Muslim of Khurasan, who with high purpose and skill extirpated, root and branch, a government like the government of the Bani Umayya, at the peak of power and the height of fortune, and who scraped their proud face into the dust of baseness. And also at the time of the ranging of my thoughts in this field, the life of Peter the Hermit passed before my perception: The zeal of that indigent hermit and the resolution of that poor monk; how he took a cross on his back and traversed deserts and mountains and entered city after city of the Franks, and every kingdom raised the cry: "On to battle"; so that he became the cause of the Crusades and the kindler of those horrendous events. The flame of emulation was lit in my heart, and the devotion and skill of the Khurasanian made life and ease forbidden for me. I knew that to consider deeds difficult is nothing but meanness of spirit and baseness and vileness of nature, and that very trouble is accepted by those with zeal. And since that magnificent pivot of the state [i.e., the addressee] is known in all climes for complete resolution, and is praised on all tongues of the people of the cities and has chosen patriotism (*hubb-i milla*) and has seen his honor in the perpetuation of this holy people (*ummat-i muqaddaseh*); therefore I will with full freedom express my thoughts to Your Excellency, without regard for the fact that I am an unknown and insignificant person, and Your Excellency is a famous amir; since the sages of the world on questions of service to the *milla* and love for government and *umma* pay no attention to rank but always keep their eyes on the goals, from wherever it may come and from whomever it may be.

And these thoughts are:

FIRST: Since the Muslims of India, with their great numbers are mostly holders of property and wealth, and are extremely firm in Islam and are devoted to the defense of the

⁴ Keddie, "al-Afghani," pp. 133-38.

faith and *milla*, despite the frailty of their bodies; and although these rich men always boast of their equity and liberality and are happy to give, especially in support of the faith, and wish for praise and fame in the path of religion and the protection of the faith and seek glory; nevertheless they have slept the sleep of neglect and reposed on the bed of ignorance; and they have not understood the benefits of unity and harmony and they do not perceive the harm of division and discord. Therefore, this humble one [i.e., I] desires for the love of the community (or patriotically—Arabic, *hubban fi al-milla*) to proceed to that kingdom and to meet with all the nawwabs and princes and ulama and grandees of that land and explain to them one by one the results that are manifested from unity and solidarity in the whole world and the injuries that have appeared from division and disunity; and to caress their ears with the mystery of the *hadith*, "the faithful are brothers"; and to express inspiring and prudent words and to attract the friendship and cooperation of the learned and the eloquent; and to breathe into them *the new spirit of love of nationality* [*ruh-i jadid-i hubb-i milliyyat*—an indication that Afghani recognized the novelty of this spirit] and to rend the curtain of their neglect; to explain to them the place of the luminous Sultanate in the world of Islam; and to reveal and make manifest to this group the fact that the perpetuation of religion depends on the perpetuation of this government. And in all the mosques of the famous cities I shall light a flame in their inner hearth by means of appealing sermons and *hadiths* of the Best of the Prophets, and I shall altogether burn out their patience and long-suffering. And I shall dispatch some of the eloquent ulama among them to some of the distant cities and I shall call all of the Muslims of India to contribute money, and I shall not follow another but this, without encroaching upon the policy of the English Government or speaking a word against them.⁵ Indeed I shall lay the foundation of my case on the intentions of the Russians [against the Muslims] and will speak eloquently on this subject. And there is no doubt that the English nation (*ta'ifeh*) will be made happy by this wise movement, which will be the cause of the repulsion of the Indians from the Russians; and it is possible that the English, when they recognize that this movement is in harmony with their policy, they too will encourage them [the Indians] to contribute financially, and will become a true partner in this affair. When the movement takes place in India it will have several advantages: *first*, I have no doubt that incalculable financial aid will be forthcoming; *second*, strong friendship and cooperation, perhaps complete Unity of Islam (*ittihad-i tamm-i islamiyyeh*) will come about among the Muslims; *third*, when the Unity of all the Muslims becomes understood by the English nation of course they will always maintain a firm policy [in support of] the Ottoman Government; *fourth*, a fine point which is not hidden from those of perception [?implying a revived and expanded Muslim empire under the Sultan].

SECOND: I wish after the completion of the Indian affair to go to Afghanistan and invite the people of that land, who like a lion have no fear of bloodshed and do not admit hesitation in war, especially religious war, to a religious struggle and a national endeavour [*muharabeh-yi diniyyeh va mujahedeh-yi milliyyeh*]. I shall emphasize Russia's aims and convey with an eloquent tongue that if, God forbid, a calamity befalls the Ottoman

⁵ Britain had been generally supportive of the Ottoman Empire such as fighting on its behalf against Russia in the 1854-56 Crimean War, so Afghani is downplaying his opposition to British imperialism in this letter to an Ottoman official.

Government, neither will permanence remain to Mecca, nor majesty to Medina, and not even the name of Islam, or a rite of the faith will survive. And that afterward they will neither hear the voice of the mu'azzin nor see the Koran reader.⁶ They will be as low as the Jews of Bukhara, and like sheep without masters a prey to the rapacious wolf. I shall strike the call, "Arise to battle," and raise the sound, "O, sacrifice for Islam." And I shall send the good eloquent ulama to all the people, to the valleys and the mountains, and I shall sponsor alliances with the princes and nobles and warriors and khans. And in all religious sermons I shall make clear the advantages of zeal and ardor and will make a general call to the milli war to all, young and old, weak and strong. And I shall send some of the experienced, informed, and wise ulama to Kokand and Bukhara to explain conditions for the people of those lands, and make them await the time and the hour and the arrival of the end of the period [*muntazir-i vaqt va sa'at va hulul-i muddat*—the exact terminology often used to herald the advent of the Mahdi].⁷

And after finishing the call to Afghanistan I will go to Baluchistan with the greatest speed and call the people of that land, who are continually employed in brigandage and raiding and plunder, to [join] the general war, with religious exhortation and the lure of worldly profit, and will bring to bear on them the old tricks of diplomacy. And I will head to the Turkomans—those unfortunates who were always known for bravery and daring, and celebrated in all tongues for bloodshed and rebelliousness, but recently have worn the hat of shame on their head and the shirt of disgrace on their breast, and thrown their fame of so many years to the wind, and submit to the subjection of the commands of Russia—and I will call them to revenge and incite the pride of their Turkish race [*jinsiyyat-i turkiyyeh*—another modern thought] and carry the banner of Unity of Islam (*ittihad-i islamiyyeh*) on my shoulder into those regions also and call to religious war, and as usual not overlook any stratagems or ruse, and plant the seed of ardor and zeal within them, always working with the wisest ulama. And I shall send missionaries of sharp tongue to Kashgar and Yarkand to call the believers of those lands to the unity of the people of the faith. And it is obvious that, when the people begin to fight, the amirs perforce will enter the field without delay. Since I know the customs and temperament of those people and have insight into their nature and habits, I have no doubt that all the Muslims will attack the Russians enthusiastically. They will conquer the Russians on that side, and even altogether destroy them. And no one can deny the immediate advantages of such an event, and its far-reaching benefit, which is the unity of Islam and the union of the community (*ittihad-i islamiyyeh va ittifaq-i ummat*). And along with this when the people of Afghanistan, who are really the wall and buttress of India, attack Russia, the English will inevitably and forcibly devote their whole efforts to the fight, and will be mixed up to their necks and give up the thoughts of domination. [There is an ambiguity, probably deliberate, as to whether the Russians, the English or, by implication, both, will be so distracted by this fight as to give up attempts at domination of the Muslims and Ottomans].

⁶ The mu'azzin is the one who calls Muslims to worship in the mosque.

⁷ The Mahdi is a messianic figure expected by many Muslims to return to purify and to spread Islam on the earth.

And if someone should object to this plan, saying: The people of Kokand and Bukhara and Shar-i Sabz and the Turkomans, are they not the very ones who did not bring the ardor to resist the Russians, and who did not carry honor from the field, and who chose a dishonorable life over an honorable death, and committed that kind of dishonor, therefore what benefit can come from asking their aid; *I say that those wars which occurred were entirely for the sake of tyrannical amirs or oppressive governors*; and when does a man give his life for the sensual pleasures of this kind of amir and governor, and why should he place the foot of firmness and manliness into the field? *But if they fight for the defense of religion and the preservation of the faith they would either have a crown of martyrdom on their hands or the robe of honor on their breasts. For in that time everyone for the sake of his beloved object alone will seek to step into the battlefield and seek battle for the glory of religion.*

And after explaining the plan I respectfully submit that this humble one in no way wishes either a dirham or a dinar from the government. Rather I will arise to this dangerous cause for the love of Islam.

Yes—After getting financial aid in India it occurs to this humble one that I would like some medals for the Afghan, Baluch, and Turkoman amirs. The commission of such an important, weighty affair without permission and authorization from the government would be considered a presumption and an unacceptable act. Also, since those lands are extremely far from the center of politics, and their people are cut off from news of the world and of the Ottoman Government at this time, if I carry out this work without authorization perhaps the amirs of those lands will not like it, and from the seeking of unity discord will arise. Therefore I beg that this letter be passed before your perceptive eyes and its suggestions be weighed one by one by the eyes of your unerring mind, without regard for the fact that the writer is a low and insignificant man, who has no high rank and who has not achieved exalted office; because to that fortunate one [i.e., you] it is apparent that in every age great deeds of this sort issue from a man like me, wandering and with rough garments, knowing cold and heat, bitter and sweet, and having traversed many mountains and deserts and experienced the ways of men. For the men of position are apprehensive about their station, and the owners of wealth and possessions fear for their wealth and property, and possessors of luxury have not been able to endure hardship.

Therefore, if this supplication is accepted by the firm judgment and discriminating mind of that lord of wisdom and intelligence, invest me with a letter of authorization and fortify this humble one with a clear permit, so that with the utmost speed, before time is lost, I may set to work, and in this arena may sacrifice my life for the sake of the *milla*. And if for the purpose of receiving instructions it should be necessary for this humble one to come to Istanbul, I am wholly submissive to the order. The rest is the command of that lord of commands [i.e., the addressee].

Questions

1. According to Afghani, what are the problems that confront the Islamic world? Does he think the Muslims themselves have contributed to their own predicament in any way?
2. What does Afghani see as the solution to the Islamic predicament? What role does he assign to himself and to the Ottoman government in the solution?
3. What insights, if any, can one gain into the personality of Afghani from reading the letter? Are there any hints that he would approve of terrorism as a means to his goals? Why was he able to gain a following in the Islamic world?