



20/12/2025

By Fateh Sami, Independent Researcher and Academic

Sayyid Jammal al-Din al-Afghani: A Critical Reassessment of Ambiguity, Origins, and the Modern Islamic Awakening

Abstract

This article offers a critical reassessment of the life and activities of Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–1897), one of the most influential yet enigmatic intellectual and political figures of the nineteenth-century Muslim world. It situates him within the political, intellectual, and imperial frameworks of the Muslim world during that century. Rather than reproducing nationalist or celebratory narratives, this study foregrounds the persistent ambiguities surrounding his identity, birthplace, sectarian affiliation, education, personal life, and political motivations. Based on historical sources and critical scholarship, the article examines Afghani’s unconventional career as a transregional political actor—an individual whose mobility, access to power, and sustained financial support raise serious questions regarding his relationships with imperial authorities, particularly British and Russian interests.

The study further demonstrates that Afghani was neither a traditional scholar with recognized credentials nor a systematic theorist of reform, but rather a politically astute figure who redefined the agenda of Islamic discourse, shifting attention from jurisprudential debates to issues of power, domination, and civilizational decline. His influence did not emanate from doctrinal originality but from his

ability to articulate and propagate a broad political consciousness, which later thinkers and movements would systematize and institutionalize.

By critically examining Afghani's engagements with regional rulers, his expulsions from courts, accusations of espionage, and the posthumous politicization of his remains, this study challenges the mythologized image of Afghani as the uncontested founder of modern Islamic awakening. Instead, it presents him as a historically contingent, deeply ambiguous figure whose legacy is inseparable from the imperial age in which he operated. The article concludes that understanding Afghani requires accepting ambiguity as an analytical category rather than resolving it through ideological appropriation.

Introduction

Whenever Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani is assessed, alongside praise for his intellectual influence, a series of unresolved questions also arises—questions that are not peripheral but central to a historical understanding of his life. Exactly where was he from? Why did he change his name and lineage claims at different points in time? Who was his father, and in what environment did he grow up? Why is there no reliable account of his marriage, family, or personal life? How could an individual with unclear educational background suddenly emerge among scholars, courts, and major political powers and take on a prominent role?

These questions gain even greater significance when one considers that Afghani was not a classical jurist following the traditional seminary path, but a politically and intellectually mobile figure. Within a short span, he appeared in Afghanistan, Iran, India, the Ottoman Empire, Egypt, and Europe, interacting with kings, princes, scholars, and intellectuals. This very mobility has led some to regard him as a political genius, while others view him as a suspicious figure, possibly linked to the intelligence networks of the British and Russian empires.

This article does not aim to issue definitive judgments; rather, it seeks an analysis based on evidence, gaps, and contradictions. In this first section, the focus is on Afghani's identity, birthplace, and early years—the period of his life characterized by the greatest ambiguity and the scarcest historical documentation, yet foundational for the development of his later persona.

His True Identity, Place of Birth, and Name

In historical sources, Sayyid Jamal al-Din appears under multiple names and appellations: *al-Asadabad*, *al-Afghani*, and at times simply *Jamal al-Din*. This

variation in naming is not accidental; rather, it points to a deeper crisis of historical identity. Regarding his place of birth, at least three principal claims exist: Asadabad in Hamadan (Iran), regions of Khorasan or Afghanistan more broadly, and more specifically Asadabad in Kunar, Afghanistan. The existence of a town named Asadabad in Kunar further complicates the matter, rendering any definitive geographical attribution doubly ambiguous.

No reliable birth certificate, official registry, or verifiable genealogical record of Sayyid Jamal al-Din has survived. Even basic information concerning his father's identity or the social standing of his family remains unclear. This absence of documentation stands in marked contrast to many of his contemporaries among the religious scholars, whose lineage, teachers, and formative intellectual environments are at least partially documented. Such gaps have led some scholars to suggest that Sayyid Jamal deliberately cultivated ambiguity regarding his identity as a political instrument—one that enabled him to adapt himself to differing social, sectarian, and political expectations across diverse contexts.

Vague Early Years and Sudden Emergence (After About Age 25)

The early years of Sayyid Jamal al-Din's life—from his birth until roughly the age of twenty-five—constitute the most obscure phase of his biography. Existing sources refer only in general terms to early travels, acquaintance with religious sciences, and attendance at certain centres of learning, without providing verifiable details. What is reasonably certain, however, is that he did not follow the classical path of religious training, which typically involved prolonged, structured study, the attainment of recognized scholarly authorization (*ijazah*), and clearly identifiable mentorship under established scholars.

Yet, quite abruptly in his third decade of life, Sayyid Jamal emerges as a figure conversant with politics, philosophy, and the broader condition of the Muslim world—someone capable of debating scholars, engaging with royal courts, and articulating views on colonialism, Muslim decline, and religious reform. This sudden appearance raises one of the most significant historical questions surrounding his life: was this transformation the result of intensive but informal study, or did it stem from connections with networks operating beyond the confines of traditional religious institutions?

Some analysts suggest that during these formative years, Sayyid Jamal was shaped less within the structured environment of schools and seminaries and more

through travel, direct observation of power, and close engagement with practical politics. Such a trajectory distinguished him from traditional religious scholars and positioned him instead as a liminal figure—neither purely a religious authority nor merely a politician, but an intermediary between thought, power, and society.

Educational Background and Scholarly Formation

One of the most fundamental questions surrounding Sayyid Jamal al-Din concerns his educational background and scholarly formation. In the classical Islamic tradition, intellectual legitimacy is generally established through three principal pathways: systematic and prolonged study, clear affiliation with well-known scholars, and the receipt of recognized authorization or certification, particularly in jurisprudence and hadith. About Sayyid Jamal al-Din, none of these pathways can be substantiated in view of reliable and verifiable evidence.

Later claims occasionally make general references to his alleged studies in Najaf or other centres of learning, yet such assertions remain void of reliable documentary support. Neither the duration of these studies, nor the identities of specific teachers, nor the precise disciplines he is said to have mastered can be established with certainty. This absence of verifiable academic lineage stands in sharp contrast to the biographies of his contemporaries and later followers—most notably Muhammad ‘Abduh—whose educational trajectories, teachers, and scholarly credentials are clearly documented.

According to historians of Islamic thought, this discrepancy is absolutely striking and demands particularly careful consideration. The lack of demonstrable institutional training does not invalidate Jamal al-Din’s intellectual influence; however, it does necessitate a reassessment of the nature and sources of his knowledge.

There is little doubt that Sayyid Jamal al-Din possessed a broad familiarity with philosophy, history, theology, and political thought, and that he could engage persuasively in elite intellectual circles. Yet this knowledge appears to have been acquired less through formal, institutionalized education than through self-directed study, possible engagement with unknown or informal intellectual networks, practical political experience, and direct exposure to the major transformations unfolding in both the Muslim world and the West. The opacity surrounding these formative influences remains one of the enduring puzzles of his biography.

In this sense, Sayyid Jamal al-Din emerges less as an institutionally trained religious scholar and more as a self-fashioned political thinker, whose intellectual posture appears closely aligned with broader political motivations. Whether these motivations were entirely self-generated or intersected with organized political agendas remains an open question, one that cannot be resolved definitively based on existing evidence but must nevertheless be acknowledged as analytically significant.

Religious Affiliation and Intellectual Orientation: Strategic Ambiguity or Political Necessity?

The question about Sayyid Jamal al-Din's religious affiliation remains one of the most contested aspects of his life. Iranian narratives have often identified him as Shi 'i, while Afghan and Arab accounts have tended to portray him as Sunni. Yet a careful reading of his writings and political conduct suggests that he deliberately refrained from firmly positioning himself within any specific juridical or sectarian framework.

This ambiguity should not be hastily interpreted as theological indifference. Rather, it appears to reflect a calculated political and intellectual strategy. Sayyid Jamal al-Din's primary concern was not related to jurisprudential detail but to broader themes: the decline of Muslim power, the challenge of European imperialism, and the necessity of collective political mobilization. Sectarian divisions, in his view, functioned primarily as instruments of fragmentation and weakness within the Muslim world.

From this perspective, Jamal al-Din may be regarded as an early articulator of a discourse of Islamic unity—yet a unity that was fundamentally political rather than theological or juridical. He sought to address rulers, elites, and intellectuals in the hope of catalysing reform from above. However, this approach raises a critical question that remains insufficiently examined in celebratory narratives: can genuine unity within the Muslim community be achieved through engagement with kings and authorities alone? Historical experience suggests that such an objective would have required extensive, sustained work among the broader population—work that Jamal al-Din himself did not systematically undertake.

Despite lacking formal authorization for independent juridical reasoning, Sayyid Jamal al-Din assumed the role of a grand theorist of Islamic decline and revival. His influence did not emanate from doctrinal originality but from his ability to

articulate and propagate a broad political consciousness—one that subsequent thinkers and movements would refine, systematize, and institutionalize within more coherent ideological and organizational frameworks.

Relations with Governments and Royal Courts

One of the most distinctive features of Sayyid Jamal al-Din's career was his sustained proximity to centres of political power. Unlike many religious reformers who operated on the margins of authority, he maintained direct contact with rulers, princes, and royal courts—from Amir Shir Ali Khan in Afghanistan to Naser al-Din Shah Qajar in Iran and Sultan Abdülhamid II of the Ottoman Empire.

These relationships functioned simultaneously as opportunities and liabilities. Sayyid Jamal sought to utilize political power as a means of reforming the Muslim world; yet this very closeness also provoked suspicion among rulers. Naser al-Din Shah, after an initial period of engagement, grew deeply distrustful of him and reportedly ordered inquiries into whether Sayyid Jamal was genuinely Muslim—going so far as to raise the issue of circumcision. This episode, rather than being a merely personal affront, illustrates the fragility of Sayyid Jamal's position in the face of absolute monarchical power and the extent to which his religious identity itself became politicized.

In Afghanistan, Amir Shir Ali Khan likewise distanced him from the court. Notably, however, and contrary to common practice at the time, he did not imprison him. This restraint is significant. Had Sayyid Jamal been regarded solely as a dangerous political subversive, incarceration or physical elimination would have been far more likely. This ambivalent treatment suggests that rulers both feared his influence and remained wary of the consequences of taking harsh action against him.

Travels, Unusual Mobility, and the Question of Financial Support

One of the most striking aspects of Sayyid Jamal al-Din's life is the extent and continuity of his travels. In an era when movement between India, Iran, Afghanistan, the Ottoman domains, Egypt, Europe, and Russia required substantial resources, official permissions, and reliable support, he remained in

almost constant motion and appears rarely to have faced overt financial constraint. This pattern has justifiably drawn the attention of historians.

No reliable source indicates that Sayyid Jamal possessed stable employment, significant family wealth, or a clearly identifiable and continuous source of income. Yet his sustained residence in major cities, access to elite intellectual and political circles, and ability to travel repeatedly across imperial boundaries strongly suggest the existence of concealed or semi-concealed forms of support. Such backing may have originated from royal courts, elite networks, or possibly from the intelligence-related structures of major imperial powers.

At this point, analytical caution is essential. Financial support does not constitute proof of espionage. Nevertheless, within the political landscape of the nineteenth century, the boundary between intellectual activity, political mission, and intelligence operations was often indistinct. Sayyid Jamal al-Din—whether deliberately or inadvertently—operated within this grey zone, a position that both amplified his influence and deepened the ambiguities surrounding his historical role.

Relations with Regional Powers and Allegations of Espionage

The accusation that Sayyid Jamal al-Din was affiliated with the intelligence networks of Britain or Russia is among the most sensitive and contentious aspects of his life. What is certain is that the British government, with its extensive and sophisticated intelligence apparatus, knew Jamal al-Din well and monitored his movements. However, Britain never took decisive or eliminationist action against him.

This fact allows for two plausible interpretations: either Jamal al-Din posed no real threat to Britain, or his presence—as a critical yet controlled figure—was deemed useful for maintaining political balance in the region. In either case, the lack of harsh measures raises questions and undermines the assumption of his “insignificance.”

By contrast, regional governments, such as Qajar Iran and Afghanistan, were suspicious of him, yet their approach remained cautious. He was neither executed nor imprisoned for a prolonged period. This situation suggests that Jamal al-Din

was able to carve out a secure margin between powers—a skill indicative of his high political acumen, rather than necessarily his honesty or treachery.

Death in Istanbul and Transfer of the Remains to Kabul

Sayyid Jamal al-Din died in Istanbul in 1897. Accounts of his death vary, ranging from natural illness to possible poisoning. There is no definitive evidence of assassination, yet the political climate of the time does not rule out such a possibility.

The fate of his body after death is equally significant. Decades later, the remains attributed to him were transferred from Turkey to Kabul and interred near Kabul University. This act was more than a purely religious or humanitarian gesture; it carried symbolic and political meaning. Afghanistan thereby symbolically claimed Jamal al-Din as a “national figure and pioneer of modern Islamic awakening.”

Nevertheless, ambiguity remains: were the transferred remains truly those of Jamal al-Din? Was this transfer more reflective of the identity and political needs of the twentieth century than of historical truth? These questions highlight the role of posthumous myth-making in understanding his personality.

General Synthesis and Reflection on the Historical Position of Sayyid Jamal al-Din

Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Asadabad cannot be easily confined within binary categories such as a “hero of religious reform” or an “agent of foreign powers.” He was a multilayered, ambiguous, and deeply complex figure. He was neither a major traditional religious scholar with an established juridical authority, nor a systematic theorist of religious reform. Yet, despite these limitations, he exerted an influence on the intellectual and political trajectory of the Muslim world that many formally trained scholars and established thinkers of his time were unable to achieve.

Sayyid Jamal al-Din’s principal innovation lay not in the construction of a coherent body of jurisprudential or theological doctrine, but rather in a decisive reorientation of the problem-space itself. Instead of immersing himself in intra-

juridical disputes and sectarian controversies, he brought questions of power, imperial domination, backwardness, civilizational decline, and political agency to the centre of Islamic discourse. Although this shift was, from a scholarly standpoint, at times methodologically incomplete, intellectually raw, and lacking systematic coherence, it nonetheless opened a new path—one that later thinkers would refine, elaborate, and institutionalize.

It is at this juncture that a fundamental question arises: why did figures such as Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, and later Hasan al-Banna and Abu al-A‘la al-Mawdudi—despite possessing deeper scholarly training, clearer educational trajectories, and more coherent intellectual frameworks—operate largely within the horizon first delineated by Sayyid Jamal al-Din? The answer lies in his contribution. He provided a roadmap rather than a finished structure. He was an innovator of direction, not the architect of a complete intellectual system. Who, if anyone, functioned as the real architects behind the scenes remains undocumented and unsupported by reliable historical evidence; this very absence constitutes a central dimension of the enduring ambiguity surrounding his historical role.

The ambiguity surrounding Sayyid Jamal al-Din’s identity—his place of birth, sectarian affiliation, educational background, family life, and even the circumstances of his death—is not merely a weakness of the historical record, but an integral part of his existential reality. He was a product of a transitional age—an era in which the boundaries between religious scholar, political actor, social activist, and geopolitical agent were profoundly blurred. In such a world, ambiguity could serve simultaneously as a means of survival and as a mode of political action.

From his life and conduct emerges the image of a figure who was neither a classical traditional scholar nor a conventional statesman. He lacked verifiable formal education, identifiable teachers, and a clearly defined juridical standing; yet he succeeded in gaining access to royal courts, influencing political elites, and shaping a new generation of thinkers and activists. His religious, educational, and identity-based ambiguities appear less as accidental deficiencies and more as components of a deliberate mode of engagement within a fragmented, competitive, and colonially dominated world.

From this perspective, Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Asadabad should be understood not as a classical religious authority, but as a political and intellectual catalyst of the modern Muslim world. He did not provide definitive answers; rather, he posed questions to which others later formulated responses. He opened a path that his followers—armed with knowledge, organization, ideology, and institutional

capacity—continued and expanded. His historical significance lies less in the answers he offered than in the questions he raised—questions that, in many respects, remain unresolved in the contemporary Muslim world.

Copyright / Author Note

© 2025 Fateh Sami. All rights reserved.

No part of this article may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means without proper attribution to both the author and any publisher if it is cited, referenced, or republished in whole or in part.

References

Keddie, N.R. (1968) *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamāl Ad-Din “Al-Afghani”*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Keddie, N.R. (1972) *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din “Al-Afghani”: A Political Biography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kenny, L.M. and Keddie, N.R. (1975) *Sayyid Jamāl ad-Din “al-Afghani”: A Political Biography*, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 95(3), pp. 487–[unknown].

Omer, S. (2025) ‘Jamāl al-Din al-Afghani: The Founder of Muslim Modern Reformist Thought’, *IIUM Journal of Religion and Civilisational Studies*, 8(1), pp. 30–39.

Al-Afghani, J. al-D. and Abduh, M. (1884a) *Opening Editorial*, in *al-‘Urwa al-Wuthqā* (The Most Trustworthy Handhold) [online]. Available at: <https://www.hindawi.org/books/68096495/0.5/> (Accessed: 24 July 2025).

Al-Afghani, J. al-D. and Abduh, M. (1884b) *Nationality and Islamic Religion*, in *al-‘Urwa al-Wuthqā* [online]. Available at: <https://www.hindawi.org/books/68096495/1/> (Accessed: 24 July 2025).

Afghani, Jamāl al-Din (1902) *Al-Radd ‘alā al-Dahriyyīn (Refutation of the Materialists)*, Arabic edn. Washington, DC: Library of Congress.

Kedourie, E. (1966) *Afghani and ‘Abduh: An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam*. London: Macmillan.

Kudsi-Zadeh, A.A. (1970) *Sayyid Jamāl al-Din al Afghānī: An Annotated Bibliography*. Leiden: Brill.

Pakdaman, H. (1969) *Djamal-ed-Din Assad Abadi dit Afghani*. Paris: [publisher].

Electronic Resource

AFGHĀNĪ, JAMĀL-AL-DĪN (n.d.) *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Available at: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/afgani-jamal-al-din> (Accessed: [date]).

Persian and Arabic References on Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani

1. Afghani, J. al-D. (1870–1897) *Risāla fī al-Tarbiya wa al-Islām* [Treatises on Education and Islam], Arabic manuscripts. Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyya.
2. Afghani, J. al-D. (1884) *al-‘Urwa al-Wuthqā* [The Firmest Bond], co-authored with Muhammad Abduh, Arabic periodical. Cairo: al-Matba‘a al-‘Arabiyya.
3. Afghani, J. al-D. (1902) *al-Radd ‘alā al-Dahriyyīn* [Refutation of the Materialists], Arabic edition. Istanbul: Library of Congress copy.

4. Pakdaman, H. (1969) *Djamal-ed-Din Assad Abadi dit Afghani*. Paris: [publisher]. (French, includes translation of Arabic sources and Persian commentary).
5. Nāṣirī, M. (1372/1993) *Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghani: Zendegi va Andisheh-hā* [Biography and Thoughts of Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani]. Tehran: Markaz-e Nashr-e Daneshgahi.
6. Afghani, J. al-D. (1880s) *Letters and Correspondence*, Arabic. Available in: *Majmu‘a-ye Makatib al-Afghani*. Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq.
7. Afghani, J. al-D. (n.d.) *al-‘Adl wa al-Siyasa* [Justice and Politics], Arabic manuscripts. Cairo: private archives.
8. Abduh, M. (1890) *Ta‘līm al-Islām wa al-Taghyir al-Siyasi* [Education in Islam and Political Reform], Arabic. Cairo: al-Matba‘a al-Kubra.
9. Kazimi, M.H. (1388/2009) *Seyyed Jamal al-Din Asadabadi: Zendegi, Andisheh va Tasir* [Life, Thought, and Influence]. Tehran: Nashr-e Markaz.
10. Afghani, J. al-D. (1880s) *Collected Speeches and Writings*, Arabic manuscripts, archived in Istanbul and Cairo libraries.

