

***Waning Crescent: The Rise and Fall of Global Islam*, by Faisal Devji. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2025, 280 pp.; ISBN: 9780300276633**

Fatiha Daouar<sup>1</sup> 

What happens when Muslims stop treating Islam as a creed and start treating it as a character in world history? That is the quiet provocation at the heart of Faisal Devji's new book, and it lands at an opportune moment. After this journal's 2025 special issue on the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which asked how Islamic institutions persist without sovereignty, Devji asks a harder question: whether the very idea of Islam can persist once it is detached from those institutions?

His answer is disarmingly simple. Islam became globally thinkable in the nineteenth century not because it traveled farther—it had already traveled—but because it lost its moorings. Kings who had endowed madrasas disappeared. Scholars whose fatwas carried weight found their audiences scattered. In that vacuum, ordinary believers stepped forward. They did not become theologians. They became representatives. The consequences of that shift are the book's real subject. Devji argues, and he is persuasive here, that once Islam was imagined as an impersonal historical actor it could no longer be defined in the old ways. Theologically it had no single creed to enforce. Politically it had no state to embody it. What remained was a civilizational subject, capable of acting in the world but curiously unable to will anything for itself.

Reading this argument alongside a shelf of Maliki commentaries makes the tension immediate. Those texts assume the opposite: that Islam endures precisely through dense, local mediation. That contrast is why the book deserves a hearing in these pages.

Devji is not offering another genealogy of Islamism. He is proposing a theory of religious agency. The Muslim Brotherhood, the Taliban, even the OIC appear only at the margins. His target is the common assumption that religion must be mediated by clerics, by law, or by the state in order to become political. He inverts it. When mediation thins out, he suggests, religion does not retreat. It spreads, but in a form that no one quite controls.

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<sup>1</sup> Fatiha Daouar is Lecturer specializing in creeds and religions at the University of Algiers 1, Algeria. Contact E-mail: [f.daouar@univ-alger.dz](mailto:f.daouar@univ-alger.dz)

Much of the book's force comes from its chronology. Standard accounts still locate the birth of political Islam after 1967 or after 1979, in defeat and revolution. Devji moves the clock back a century. For him the crucial moment is not Khomeini's return but the nineteenth-century imagination of Islam as a single, global entity. That move is useful. It helps explain something that has puzzled historians of North African law: why juridical instruments like *sadd al-dharā'ī*—blocking the means to harm—were refined and codified at the very moment Muslim rulers lost effective power. Devji, however, never mentions *sadd al-dharā'ī*. A reader formed in Ash'arite theology notices the silence at once. In Algeria and Morocco, Maliki jurists in the 1880s through the 1930s were doing exactly what Devji deems impossible: they were trying to hold doctrinal boundaries intact without a sultan to enforce them. They wrote not for courts, which the French had curtailed, but for teachers, for village councils, for families.

That brings me to a first reservation. Devji writes that "ordinary Muslims... were freed from traditional forms of Islamic authority" (Devji 2025, 76). Freed is one word for it. Abandoned might be another. The North African archive does not read like liberation. It reads like improvisation under pressure—fatwas that stretch analogy to its limit, manuals copied by hand because printing presses were watched, debates over minute points of creed conducted in private homes. This was less emancipation than a salvage operation, carried out through *uṣūl al-fiqh*. Seen that way, the effort looks less like the disappearance of mediation and more like its relocation. In the language we now use for the OIC, it was soft power before the term existed. *Sadd al-dharā'ī* was not just a maxim. It was a way to keep a community coherent when hard power was gone. Devji's global story would be sharper had it made room for that regional persistence.

A second unease follows Devji's notion of Islam as strikingly creedless. There is no Ash'arism here, no Māturīdism, no sustained theology at all. The result is elegant—a clean line from empire to globe—but it flattens the lived texture of religion. Where, for instance, are the *zāwīyas* that preserved *Maliki-Ash'ari* teaching in western Algeria through the 1920s? Where are the fatwa committees that reconstituted themselves after independence? Where are the women in Constantine and Algiers who kept creedal primers alive in the 1990s, teaching *Jawharat al-Tawhīd* in living rooms while public mosques were policed? They do not enter the frame.

And yet the second half of the book largely redeems the first. Devji's chapters on humanitarian Islam, on the Qur'an recast as cultural heritage, and on the careful sanitizing of Malcolm X in American memory are exact. He shows, with astringent clarity, how a globalized Islam ends up mirroring the secular universalism it claims to resist. Strip away kings and muftis and what is left is not a purer faith but a set of moral vocabularies—human rights, relief work, heritage preservation—borrowed from the very order Islam is supposed to contest.

That diagnosis rings true in the classroom. Students who have never known a

caliphate reach instinctively for the global idiom because the local theological lexicon feels thin, even suspect. Devji is right to say that contemporary Muslim activism often speaks human rights because it has inherited an Islam that struggles to speak theologically. He offers no program, nor does he pretend to. He is a historian, not a mutakallim. Still, his argument invites a theological reply. If global Islam wanes because it shed mediation, the task is not nostalgia. It is to rethink mediation elsewhere; not through the state, that avenue is closed, but through creed, through the disciplined argument that the Ash'arite tradition once modeled. Whether that is possible under present conditions is an open question. Devji would likely doubt it. Having spent years teaching *sadd al-dharā'i'* to students born after 2000, I am not ready to concede the point.

The book is also, simply, well written. At 280 pages it resists the bloat that now afflicts much academic prose. Devji favors short, aphoristic sentences. The argument moves. It reads, in the best sense, like the kind of long essay this journal was created to publish. Will specialists agree with him? Many will not. Historians of law will want the jurists back in. Anthropologists will want the *zāwiyas* back in. Theologians will want creed back in. But they will all have to reckon with the central claim. For scholars of the OIC, of constitutional theologies, or of Sufism and the state, *Waning Crescent* shifts the terms. The urgent question is no longer how to make Islam political again. It is how to understand the peculiar politics that emerged once Muslims deliberately, and sometimes desperately, depoliticized it.

That is an uncomfortable thought. It is also persuasive enough to argue with, which is precisely what a good book review should provoke.

## References

Devji, Faisal. 2025. *Waning Crescent: The Rise and Fall of Global Islam*. New Haven: Yale University Press.