Foreword

Among Australia’s many treasures is a world-class Middle East Studies community, one of whose long-time leaders is Dr Robert Bowker, currently Adjunct Professor at the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies at the Australian National University in Canberra. This book is a product of Dr Bowker’s many years of study and residence in the Arab world, most recently as Australia’s Ambassador to Egypt where he was also accredited to Libya, Sudan, Syria, and Tunisia. Prior to this assignment, Bowker served as his country’s Ambassador to Jordan with prior postings to Syria and Saudi Arabia. Years before his service in Cairo, Dr Bowker came to the attention of his fellow scholars with the publication of important works on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and Middle East security. The book you are about to read is the culmination of almost four decades of public service in, and acute observation of numerous corners of the Arab world, high level involvement in the policy-making of a country with significant Middle East interests, and a respected position in the global Middle East Studies community.

Somewhat surprisingly, in recent years Egypt has not received the analytic attention that it so richly deserves. Perhaps scholarship follows the money or the brouhaha but for whatever reason external analytic and policy attention to other Middle Eastern actors has superseded that focussed on Egypt. This skewed focus should not blind us to the fact that Egypt has always been and is likely to remain not only the oldest and the largest, but in many ways still the leading country in the Arab world. It is a political, social, and cultural entity of unique and extraordinary importance. We have only ourselves to blame if we are inattentive to the travails of a country which in many ways is the window into the heart and soul of the Arab world. Through the journey of its people we can bear witness to the hopes, dreams, frustrations, failures and successes of the Arab world writ large. Dr Bowker repeatedly reminds us of this fact.

The themes of this extraordinary book are too complex to be easily captured in a short statement of this sort. Nonetheless, in a broad-stroke fashion we can say that Dr Bowker has produced a book about Arab political culture that analyses how the Arab world, as seen in part through
the experience of Egypt, is affected by the process of globalization. It is fair to say that much of the Arab world is more passively affected by globalization, less able to have an instrumental impact and a leadership role in shaping the course and direction of this all important global trend. There are of course exceptions, but in large part Egyptians aren’t causing the rain, they merely get wet when the skies open. And Arab governments, Egypt’s in particular, tend to be reactive rather than proactive in dealing with the vicissitudes of these and other global phenomena. In Egypt there are of course significant forces resisting such change altogether. In many ways there is little that is more powerful than the torpor of the Egyptian political establishment that is working overtime to protect its power and privilege and to blunt, ignore, or deflect change which may dilute its special place in Egyptian society.

What is particularly important about this book is that it is being written in anticipation of a leadership transition in Egypt that is likely to have a profound impact not only on Egypt itself, but potentially on its Arab neighbours. In recent times Morocco, Jordan, Syria, and Bahrain have had smooth internally-driven leadership successions, unlike Iraq for example, and thus the region has become somewhat accustomed to relatively tranquil changes of the guard. Having said that, Egypt could either follow in the footsteps of these prior examples or it could not. While the world waits, not to mention the Egyptian people themselves, Dr Bowker pursues his analysis on the eve of a potentially transformational moment in Egyptian history and thus possibly for the Arab world as well.

Working at the intersection of Egyptian politics and economics, Dr Bowker takes a hard look at such important phenomena as the evolving role of business in Egypt, generational issues, the status of the various strands of Egypt’s Islamist organizations, the embryonic empowerment of women, the military and security dimensions of Arab states, and the impact of social surveillance, coercion and corruption. These are themes with relevance not only to Egypt but also to other Arab polities themselves undergoing significant change in a rapidly evolving world.

This extraordinarily rich diet concludes in a final chapter suggestively entitled Outlook: demography, democracy, dinosaurs, and diplomacy. Here Dr Bowker broadens his analysis to look at the regional interplay of many of the issues that he considers within a national context. He broadens his conclusions to other key regional actors well beyond what the Egyptians proudly call their country, Umm Al-Dunya (mother of the world), and challenges western policy-makers to find ways to support the credibility of Arab reformists. We are in Robert Bowker’s debt for helping us to remember and to focus our attention on not only the cornerstone of Arab
civilization, but also on a country whose future is a determinant to the stability of the Middle East in its entirety.

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