

# Region impoverished by its untamed riches

Political theorist Robert Fossaert says oil resources and a growing population are Arab pressure points

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**R**obert Fossaert, at 71, has the affability of a very tall, favourite uncle. But the friendliness disguises the radical nature of his thinking. In a world where the old ideologies and certainties have collapsed in the face of technological change, ethnic divisions and environmental disasters, Fossaert is one of the few political theorists who takes on the 'big questions'.

The implosion of the Communist bloc and the fragmentation of the world systems have given his thinking a fresh popularity. Outside his native France, his work has been translated into Spanish, German, Arabic, Portuguese and Japanese.

Fossaert this week made his first visit to Beirut, lecturing on Wednesday at St Joseph university and yesterday at AUB.

He argues that the Middle East is "impoverished by its untamed riches - both people and oil".

At the present rate of population growth, the 290m inhabitants of the region will double by 2030. The pressures on resources and habitat require a fresh approach to problems ranging from the economy to internal and regional dissensions.

Nor is oil a static phenomenon, as Fossaert noted in the lively question-and-answer session which followed Wednesday's lecture.

He said the region will need to take into account the technological changes affecting the industry and changes in the market: the slow but ineluctable move of the centre of gravity to new fields in the Caspian Sea and the resources discovered in and around the Orinoco river in South America.

Conversely, the Middle East should be attentive to the "slow but inevitable" relative decline of the United States as a world power. Imagine, he said, that you are in the shoes of the CEO of a major oil corporation looking three or five decades ahead. If you do see those two trends, much of what you will undertake will fail dramatically.

Nor, for those inside, is the taming of riches an easier job.

"It is crucial," Fossaert said, "not to continue the misuse of oil in the state-shells which characterise the region." For that, it



lies in conquering the Jewish diaspora. They have begun to be fed up with Israel.

"But Israel will continue to be seen as a place of asylum by the Jews well into the next century. Never, ever forget this."

Fossaert's unusual perspective has its roots in his career as a successful banker and book editor in Paris for *le Seuil*. "It was a good cocktail. As a banker I was in the real world, and as a publisher I was in the real world."

But his exploration of the limitation of the great ideologies began when he was a member of the French Communist party. After joining in 1948, he became quickly disillusioned with the party's failure to accept that the working-class was not getting poorer but rather were benefiting from post-war economic growth. "Even before the 20th party congress [when Khrushchev denounced Stalin], I rejected the theory of 'absolute pauperisation' favoured by the leadership.

"We tried to explain to them that they were dreaming."

Fossaert left the party in 1958, and published his first book *The Future of Capitalism* in 1961.

But he has never been a champion of free-market economics.

His most recent book, the concluding part of his eight-volume work on *La Société*, is entitled *The Future of Socialism*.

The title has no question mark.

Fossaert would like to come back to Lebanon and discuss matters in depth.

This might be on the occasion of efforts to publish a manuscript which brings the 2500 pages of *La Société* into one volume, and which might appear for the first time in Beirut.

Fossaert: Middle East should be attentive to the slow but inevitable decline of the US

is necessary for scholars here to elaborate "trans-national accounts of oil" - how these resources are used and how to better use them in conjunction with the most important wealth, the people, is a task "in between" research and political strategy.

In a breathless elaboration on notes and tables, and with a syntax which combines precision and a literary choice of words, Fossaert also elaborated on further propositions for advanced thinking.

"The region sits on a treasure of potential research", starting with the appropriate development of cultural heritage, not by looking at the past, but how this unique

treasure chest "can be made useful for the 21st century". In carefully structured digressions, Fossaert wondered, at St Joseph, how the university could help the process of creating an informed multi-disciplinary field including, for instance, the theological tradition to impact the 21st century.

At AUB, he spoke of the investigation into improving state structures, which are too rigid for the peoples of the region, and weak economies which include minerals in inverse relationship to the demographic distribution. The Arab world needs a subtle and realistic strategy to deal with Israel, he suggests. "The future of peace with Israel

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