

## Brexit and the EU's 'Syrian bill'

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Syria is indeed a European problem, and it shall become increasingly so. The UK's vote to withdraw from the EU has many and complex causes but it cannot be understood without making reference to the turbulence generated by the **Syrian conflict**. Two years have sufficed since the Europeans became aware of the 'refugee crisis' and since **Daesh** (the Arabic acronym for the self-proclaimed Islamic State) announced its 'caliphate' through terror for the foundations of the European edifice to tremble. And the building's British storey is on the verge of collapse, thus threatening its entire structural integrity.



The dread of immigration, the rejection of Muslim population, the threat of jihadi terrorism and criticism of the EU for its failure to control its borders are factors that have weighed in the final result of the **Brexit referendum**. These factors have also been the driving force behind the **isolationist campaign** promoted by Europhobic, xenophobic and populist leaders. Considering that the difference between the 'Out' and 'In' was merely 3.8 percentage points, it seems evident that they were essential to tilting the balance towards the option of the UK withdrawing from the EU.

**Middle-Eastern conflicts are coming ever closer to Europe.** The calamitous invasion of Iraq in 2003 flared up a destructive dynamic in a highly flammable region, marked by radicalisation, sectarianism, the banalisation of violence, **a regional cold war between Tehran and Ryadh** and the displacement of peoples, among others. Nevertheless, it is the conflict that broke out in Syria in 2011 that has had the greatest destructive impact on the populations of the Middle East and, foreseeably, increasingly more on European societies.

Syria is a veritable humanitarian disaster. Five years of conflict unleashed by the brutality of the Assad regime –made more complex by the direct intervention of neighbouring countries and international powers that have nurtured diverse monsters– have led to more than 400,000 dead, 5 million refugees (half of them children) and 8 million internally displaced persons. In other words, it is as if 26 million Spaniards had been forced to flee from their homes in the space of a very few years due to a savage war.

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The Syrian conflict has unleashed the greatest cross-border humanitarian crisis the world has seen since the Second World War. It has also spurred the emergence and propagation of Daesh. Most dishearteningly, **in the absence of a solution on the horizon, the destabilising effects of the Syrian crisis can only multiply**, even for the project of European integration. In the face of these events, the EU has proved to be totally incapable of imposing peace on that part of its immediate neighbourhood. While Europeans –once again– expected a US President to put the Old World in order, instead, Obama's policy toward the Syrian conflict has been erratic and has merely served to aggravate it.

The fear, anxiety and phobias gripping segments of Western societies are marking the **transition to a post-factual world** in which facts do not matter that much: a world in which gut feelings feed off and feed back into the narratives of the likes of individuals such as Farage, Trump and Le Pen. The vote for Brexit –despite all warnings about its self-destructive implications– seems

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to prove it. In the face of the threats emerging from the conflicts in the Middle East and the methods employed by some of their regimes to cling to power indefinitely, isolationism is a temptation that is spreading throughout Western societies as a form of self-defence. The free circulation of persons within the EU's national borders may well be a further casualty.

To continue practicing 'ostrichism' in regards to the Syrian conflict is an option for European leaders who believe they can thereby avoid short-term political risks, but the cost may well be very high indeed for the Union's citizens who hope for **a sound, just and sustainable EU**. Or did Europe's leaders think that the terrible human catastrophes unfolding in Syria and Iraq would resolve of their own accord, or that so much suffering would never affect Europe?

The real time-bomb facing the EU is not the current flood of Syrian and Iraqi refugees, and not even the terrorist acts of criminals who have hijacked Islam for their own purposes. **The true time-bomb is the relentless destruction of Syria by Assad and the jihadis**, given that the country is an epicentre of the quake that is shaking the EU to its foundations. What is highly alarming is that Europe's 'seismologists' do not seem to have located that epicentre, which is the first and vital step to find solutions and prevent greater damages.