

# **The Fog of Civil War**

## ***Thought for the Day***

***Ephraim Borowski (Director, Scottish Council of Jewish Communities)***

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As I've said before, the Jewish religious calendar is nothing if not complex! Without going into detail, suffice it to say that today is the holiday of Purim – in Jerusalem, but nowhere else. Jewish people throughout the rest of the world celebrated it yesterday.

Purim recalls the story told in the Book of Esther. It's a complex tale set in the ancient Persian empire, which stretched, as it says, "from India to North Africa" – exactly the area of unrest that occupies our thoughts today.

The narrative has subplots intricately woven together: a despotic ruler can't handle his wife standing up to him and advertises for a younger model; a "scattered and dispersed" minority "with strange customs" is targeted; the emperor's chief of staff takes a personal dislike to the leader of that minority and plots genocide; the young queen saves the day, the evil courtier gets his come-uppance, and all live happily ever after! With its unequivocal heroes and villains, for me this morality tale is the world's earliest novelette.

But it also has a darker side: ancient history is full of wars, ethnic cleansing, and genocide, usually in pursuit of territory or power, but this is a typical hate crime, extending vengeance for one individual's supposed slight to his entire race.

It's fascinating at other levels too: a biblical narrative with no mention of Gd; written in oddly ungrammatical Hebrew; starting controlled and highly structured, but ending in confused repetition of the villain's downfall. But then confusion is what it's about – the final chapters giving a good account of the fog of civil war.

In the story of Esther, the good guys win. As we look at events unfolding across the very region in which the Purim story plays out, we must hope for a peaceful outcome, without more bloodshed, avoiding the seemingly permanent quagmire that has followed western interventions in other conflicts. We have to hope and pray that it's the good guys who win – even if we're not quite sure who the good guys are!