Blaming Self and Not the Other – A New Middle East Discourse

Josef Olmert, University of South Carolina

It is a well-known Middle East phenomenon, shared by both Jews and Arabs, to "blame the other side and save your soul". This is such a common display nowadays, that when the Middle East is in the midst of such a cataclysmic crisis, in which states are either collapsing, or on the verge of collapse, and what may seem to be a Middle East and mainly Arab predicament, evolves into a major global crisis. It is also the case that Israel is in the midst of a crisis of identity, one that shatters old-established Zionist beliefs.

It is the cumulative experience of this writer, after 35 years of dealing with Middle East issues, on various levels, and in various capacities, that it is almost impossible to engage in a serious, soul-searching discussion of current Arab issues, without being labeled immediately as a "Zionist agent". So, when I wrote in 2012, what was obvious then, and even more obvious now, that the Syrian conflict is a sectarian civil war, it was immediately vilified. Another source of vilification is the blame put on the doorstep of Western colonialism. Yes, we Arabs have problems, but we all know where it all started: the West. And in the case of Israel/Palestinian, it is always the "occupation". So why not engage in a real, genuine soul-searching process. In Israel, it is almost always the concept of "they are all against us, because they are all anti-Semitic". Which stifles any serious national soul-searching process. Can it be, that "they" can sometime be right criticizing Israel, and not being anti-Semitic?

The paper will deal with these issues, uses examples from both sides, and also provides, or at least, tries to provide some ideas as to how to go beyond the current satiate of internal discourse among Arabs and Israelis.