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A settler girl is helped by two Israeli soldiers during the evacuation of the settlement of Morag.

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A young Palestinian boy holds a gun during an Aug. 19 Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine "victory" rally.

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## ***Column: Overcoming Israeli extremism***

**By: Will Dempster**

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In the human psyche, colors enjoy the rare ability to both influence and portray mood. After a two-week trip to Israel in mid-July, the color orange no longer elicits the general happiness associated with my favorite fall hue. Orange - the color adopted by Israeli opponents of the Gaza Disengagement - now weds itself to the vitriol I feel toward the seditious Israeli minority bent on perpetuating the country's ill-advised occupation of Palestinian land despite an overwhelming silent majority of their countrymen who support a Palestinian state next to Israel.

As this small minority of extremists retreats from Gaza and a few settlements in the West Bank, their messianic fantasies of a Greater Israel do not. To the majority of Israeli Jews and Arabs the political eruption resulting from this significant and courageous move out of Occupied Territories will produce an environment in which historically significant steps may be made toward solving the century-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Although it is far too soon to predict whether this step alone will produce a long-desired final status agreement, that Israel confronted and defeated the bankrupt ideology of its right-wing extremists bodes well for future success. After 40 years of indulging in the fantasy of exerting and sustaining political sovereignty over all its Biblical heartland, Israel - ironically led by the enterprise's chief architect - disengaged not only from Palestinian land, but also from an ideology which threatened the existence of an internationally legitimate Jewish State.

Emboldened by the impressive military success of the Six-Day War, Israel began to encourage Jewish immigration to the heart of the West Bank and Gaza through an intricate system of incentives. These incentives drew ordinary Israelis in addition to many extremists to the territories. It deserves to be noted that many of these settlers left with little fanfare during the current withdrawal. Along with these settlers came expropriation orders for private Palestinian-owned land, settler-only bypass roads, checkpoints and an extensive military deployment to protect the entire enterprise.

Isolated settlements in the heart of the West Bank and Gaza became bases for rabid right-wing religious

extremists exporting irrational and racist hatred of Palestinians. Successive Israeli governments coddled these radicals and often lauded them for their perceived sacrifices to redeem Biblical Israel through settlement. When politicians even hinted at removing settlements, settler leaders forewarned violence, turmoil and national trauma. Ariel Sharon, the father of the settlements, summarily upended decades of established policy by instituting unilateral disengagement from Gaza. While settler leaders deployed psychological warfare and encouraged widespread army refusal to thwart the withdrawal, not only was the disengagement free of widespread resistance, but also it was completed in nearly one-third the expected time. The logistical success of this operation underscored how Israel's religiously extreme minority no longer enjoys the ability to impose their values on a larger society.

Many of the conflict's most pressing issues remain in limbo. It remains to be seen whether the Palestinian Authority, headed by Mahmoud Abbas, will confront its own religious extremists and be capable of exerting security control over historically chaotic Gaza. Regardless of this, Israel finally stood up to its own religious extremists and shattered the mythical hold they enjoyed over Israeli society. With the dam now broken, it should be nearly impossible for Ariel Sharon, or any other Israeli leader, to ignore the vast majority of Israelis who no longer desire to reside in the Territories. With this critical precedent set it may yet be possible for Israelis and Palestinians to dwell side by side in peace.

*-The writer, a senior majoring in international affairs, is a Hatchet senior editor.*

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