Cut out cluster bombs. Period.

Canada knows these weapons put innocent lives in danger, but it must weigh their ban with the potential for upsetting the US.

SCOTT TAYLOR

Inside Defence

Embassy Photo: Ally Foster

Former chief of defence staff Walter Natynczyk, pictured in Ottawa in February, testified on the cluster bomb bill at the House foreign affairs committee last week.

Last Thursday, former chief of defence staff General (ret'd) Walter Natynczyk, appeared before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs. While Natynczyk is currently the head of the Canadian Space Agency, he testified about his experience as an exchange officer with the United States military in Iraq during 2004.

At the time, some eyebrows were raised when it was reported that Natynczyk, then a major general in the Canadian Forces, was serving as the deputy commander of the US army's III Corps. As such, he had deployed with III Corps for a 12-month tour of duty in Iraq—a war Canada had taken great political pride in refusing to participate in. This of course begged the question: how could Canada abstain from a conflict yet contribute such a senior officer to help conduct it?

In pursuit of that answer, in April 2004 I ventured into the American Green Zone in Baghdad to meet with Natynczyk and get his input on the debate. Although somewhat surprised to have a Canadian visitor appear from outside the wire, Natynczyk clarified that officer exchanges between allied nations are a common practice and that, while so employed, the Canadian officers effectively become an integral part of the host nation for the duration of their assignment.

The reason Natynczyk was before the Commons committee last week was to defend a controversial clause in Canada's proposed cluster bomb bill. Prior to accepting the Convention on Cluster Munitions—which effectively condemns all use of such anti-personnel bomblets—the Conservative government wants to add a clause that would allow Canadian Armed Forces personnel to be involved in using cluster bombs in joint operations with US forces, who do not intend to cease their employment of cluster bombs.

The US has steadfastly refused to sign the international convention, despite the fact that unexploded cluster bomblets have created grievous civilian casualties in numerous recent conflicts. During both the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, it is estimated that the US air force dropped some 74,000 cluster bombs, which contained 22 million submunitions.

In his testimony, Natynczyk stated that while that may have been the case, he was not aware of the use of cluster bombs during his tour. "I can say to you in confidence that I was never aware that cluster bombs were actually stocked in theatre, or that I participated in planning for their use or in fact authorized their use," Natynczyk told the committee. As chief of defence staff in 2008, Natynczyk issued a directive that banned members of the Canadian Armed Forces from employing such munitions.

Despite his opposition to the use of cluster bombs, Natynczyk backed the inclusion of the interoperability clause for the simple reason that he believes we need to retain our close relationship with the United States. However, when pressed by Liberal member of Parliament Marc Garneau as to whether or not Canada advocating an all-out ban of cluster bombs would be a truly harmful deal-breaker for Canada-US relations, Natynczyk admitted he wasn't sure. "I don't know enough of their thinking. I can't comment on this," Natynczyk replied.

In the late 1990s, Canada led the international convention prohibiting the use of land mines (known as the Ottawa Treaty), which is supported by more than 150 countries. These weapons are something else the US does not intend to give up the use of, and yet we still appear to be enjoying good relations.

The fact that cluster bombs by their very nature are intended to be indiscriminate area weapons makes them incredibly dangerous to civilian populations. That much is a proven fact.

Canada should ratify the convention as is, and insist on enforcing a caveat for any joint operations with US troops whereby our soldiers cannot be forced to participate in actions where cluster bombs are employed. The notion that we as a nation condemn such reckless disregard for innocent civilians—but if the Americans use cluster bombs then it's permissible—is ridiculous.

And if our blanket condemnation of such dangerous weapons somehow jeopardizes our military relations with the US, then we need to revisit the parameters of that friendship.

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A thoughtful visit to Israel's Jews and Arabs

JIM CRESKEY

The Obama administration's diplomatic deal to limit Iran's development of nuclear weapons may be only a start, tentative in many respects, but even its critics must see it as a kind of Middle Eastern diplomacy that hasn't been practiced for decades—certainly not by the United States and its allies.

"No matter what you think of it, this is a historic deal," Vali R. Nasr, the dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies told the New York Times on Monday.

"It is a major seismic shift in the region. It rearranges the entire chess board."

At the centre of that chess board is Israel, whose government sees only danger in talks with Iran. The Israeli state has two catastrophes embedded in its collective history, one that it constantly and intentionally calls to mind, the other that it takes great pains to officially forget. They are the Shoah or Holocaust, and the Nakba or forced exodus of the Palestinians.

The role of the Holocaust on Israeli decision-making can never be underestimated. "The Holocaust certainly aggravates Israeli fears and insecurities...and this is in the back of many Israelis' minds when they think about Iran, whose leaders deny the Holocaust happened, but are preparing the second Holocaust, so Israelis feel."

That statement is from Israeli historian Benny Morris and was quoted by Canadian author Jo Roberts, whose new book, Contested Land, Contested Memory, offers an important look at the complexity that is the state of Israel.

Roberts travelled extensively across Israel, meeting with Jewish and Palestinian Israelis. The result is a thoughtful probing of the two traumas that remain central to Israel.

Her writing has academic credibility and personal appeal. If that sounds unlikely, it is. Only a writer as good as Roberts could make it work—but work it does, as it proceeds to unravel Israel's paradoxical political identity.

The Nakba, or uprooting of more than 700,000 Palestinians during the war that gave birth to Israel in 1948, is not anywhere on the scale of the Holocaust genocide of six million Jews in Europe. But, unresolved, it remains a dangerous fault line that threatens the future of Israel internally, and in the long term with its Islamic neighbours.

Contested Land, Contested Memory: Israel's Jews and Arabs and the Ghosts of Catastrophe
Jo Roberts
Dundurn
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Roberts steps into the lives of Palestinians, some living as exiles, others as unwanted citizens of Israel who account for 20 per cent of the country's population. She meets with Jewish historians, some of them controversial in their own homeland. And she speaks with poor and working class Mizrahi Jews who are often marginalized by their Ashkenazi neighbours of European origin.

As she travels around the country, she points out the former Palestinian settlements and villages, forcibly abandoned, their names removed from maps and road signs, one part of the nation's trauma that is constantly erased. But no amount of official whitewash performs the exorcism. Israel is still haunted by the ghosts of the Nakba.

Roberts is empathetic to the suffering of Jews and Arabs alike but she doesn't rush to judgment. Story by story, she introduces us to an often painful complexity that promises no quick solution, but somehow carries a faint hope.

Maybe if this would happen, we think. Maybe if that.

Maybe that hope is best expressed by Yshay Shechter, who was director of strategic planning for the Jewish National Fund when Roberts spoke to him. Shechter is well aware of the history of the two traumas, the Holocaust and the Nakba, but he can see it's time to move on.

"We have to know the other side's history; erasing the history isn't good. But I don't think we should make the conflict the issue. When there is no adaptation of that story, then you are making it easy for the politicians who thrive on these divisive polarities. It memorializes the conflict, makes that the main issue, rather than finding a solution."

Contested Land, Contested Memory offers a nuanced understanding that comes from a smartly-guided tour of those Israeli polarities. I strongly recommend Roberts' eloquent visit to Israel's bold and painful past and present as spoken by Israeli voices rarely heard in Canada.

There may be times when her journey resembles Dante's nine circles of suffering. But suffering acknowledged and repaired, and then let go, could one day draw Israelis and Palestinians together.

Would that help Israel in its future relations with its neighbouring states, including Iran? I hope you can first read Jo Robert's very important book and then ask yourself that question.

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