

Nygaard Notes

Independent Periodic News and Analysis

Number 684

February 1, 2022

“I Told Them About My Goal”

In the last Nygaard Notes I reported on the first article in a remarkable two-part series on America’s air wars that was published in the New York Times in December. The remarkable journalist who produced it is named Azmat Khan, and I predicted that she would receive a Pulitzer Prize for her incredible work. We’ll see if I’m right when the awards are announced in April.

The first article bore the lengthy headline “The Civilian Casualty Files: Hidden Pentagon Records Reveal Patterns of Failure in Deadly Airstrikes.” It gave lots of facts and figures that allow readers to see some previously-obscured patterns and systems concerning what I have called The New American Way of War. The second article is a little different.

While Part One focused on the results of this journalistic project, I found myself wondering why this report—which is really just an example of what I call good journalism—seems so unusual, so striking in its impact, so worthy of wide distribution and public discussion. I found myself wondering why Azmat Khan undertook this project in the first place. Why did she do it? How did she do it? And what, exactly, did she do? The second article, Part Two in the series, which appeared in the New York Times Magazine under the headline “The Human Toll of America’s Air Wars,” answers these questions, at least in part. In this edition of the Notes I feature some excerpts from Part Two and highlight the answers they provide.

Why Did She Do It?

A little background: In 2014 the Islamic State (ISIS, or ISIL) took control of Iraq’s second city, Mosul. In 2016-17 the Iraqi government and allies attacked the city, in what was called “one of the fiercest urban battles since the second world war.” The allies

declared the “liberation” of Mosul in July of 2017.

Being aware that “There were widespread reports that coalition strikes supporting the campaign to drive ISIS from the city had killed civilians,” the journalist Azmat Khan actually went to Mosul to see if these reports were true. She reported on what she found there in the New York Times Magazine. It was the second part of a two-part series on America’s air wars published in December by the Times.

Midway through Khan’s article she tells what she learned about one coalition airstrike that struck “a home where Tariq Khalil Ibrahim Sanjari and his family were sleeping in April 2017.” Khan spoke with Sanjari’s son, Emad, and wrote:

“Using a drill hammer, a metal-cutting tool and a car jack, the neighbors worked until 1 p.m., rescuing survivors and recovering bodies. Then they took the dead, seven in all, for burial. A year later, when I spoke to him, Emad still could not understand what happened. The family heard planes overhead ‘24 hours a day,’ he told me. What were those planes doing if not providing intelligence that dozens of civilians were in this house? ISIS had previously briefly occupied the house next door to this home, he said, but abandoned it about 20 days to one month before the strike. That home did not appear to be hit. ‘What I care about the most, more than anything else, is to help prevent what happened to my family from happening to anyone else,’ Emad told me. ‘Can you uncover the truth about why this house was hit?’”

Khan reports that “By April 2016, the Pentagon was reporting that American airstrikes in Iraq and Syria

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Greetings,

Long-time readers of Nygaard Notes could be forgiven for thinking that I have no respect for mainstream journalists, or that I don't like journalists. After all, I am often very critical of stories that I see—or don't see—in the media.

But the truth is that I hold journalists in the highest regard, which is why I've devoted so much time and energy calling to your attention the recent investigative work by the conscientious and intrepid reporter Azmat Khan. Khan's reporting on the U.S. air war in Southwest Asia is exemplary, and illustrates the importance of having strong, independent journalists at work.

This week's "Quote" of the Week indicates that journalism is in crisis in this country, as more and more newspapers fail and more working journalists are laid off. Real journalism—like the journalism I'm talking about in this issue of the Notes—is expensive. In the "old days" advertisers paid the bills, and as that (deeply-flawed) system fades away, it's not at all clear who if anyone will pay for the journalism we will need if we want to live in a democratic culture.

So, may the work of Azmat Khan inspire you, and remind you that there is still such a thing as truth. Facts are facts, after all. But we must remember that, while journalists can expose the facts, it's up to all of us to act on what those facts tell us. After all, to know and not to do is not to know at all.

Knowingly yours,
Nygaard

Why? *from page 1*

had killed 25,000 ISIS fighters, while resulting in the deaths of just 21 civilians. 'With our extraordinary technology,' President Barack Obama said that year, 'we're conducting the most precise air campaign in history.' At the time, I had just finished an investigation into the U.S. government's claims about the schools it had built in Afghanistan, and I knew that there was often a divergence between what officials say and the reality on the ground."

Noting that "The rules of war serve many purposes," including "constraining the technological advances that allow military planners to deliver death with almost boundless ease," Khan states that the rules "also play a psychological role. As one military official who served at a high level in the air war against ISIS told me, the principles that guide decision-making in war are designed to provide psychological comfort to those who must make the decisions."

"That same logic could apply to ordinary Americans as well. Why do people consider the wars in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan just? How can we know that the next wars will be, too? It is nearly certain that the technologies developed during these past wars will be put to use in the next conflict. Knowing that the American military planners in charge of our new high-tech systems of air war are governed by commitments to specific principles can provide us comfort in the humanity and morality of our government's actions. In my quest to understand why American bombs landed where they did, though, I often found myself in the uncomfortable position of having to explain how these principles actually played out in practice."

In late summer 2016, Khan made a trip to a suburb of Mosul called Qaiyara, which had been hit with "multiple strikes" by U.S. forces in August. Khan could see that "Almost every major building or ↗↗↗

→→ significant piece of city infrastructure had been hit,” and she writes that “Locals told me that the airstrikes had rained down daily, particularly in the center of the town.” Yet “the Pentagon did not acknowledge a single civilian death.” Which led Khan to remark that “It was clear from just one reporting trip that there was something very wrong with the coalition’s air war.”

Khan spoke to an East Mosul resident named Basim Razzo, who lost “his wife, his daughter, his brother and his nephew” in a 2015 U.S. airstrike after “U.S. intelligence had identified the Razzo home as a car-bomb factory.” Knowing that such “intelligence” put Razzo at extreme risk, Khan sued the Pentagon in order to get “the civilian casualty assessment related to this strike.” Within months she received “a dozen partly redacted pages.” Says Khan: “This was the first report I saw, and it was a revelation to me. My hunch that something had gone very wrong had been correct.”

Another lawsuit yielded, in 2018, more than 300 pages of casualty reports from the Pentagon which, despite being heavily redacted, nonetheless “contained much that was revealing about the nature of America’s air war.” The next step was a trip to an Iraqi city called Tokhar.

“The divergence between what I saw in Tokhar and what I read in the Pentagon’s official report made me understand that the document trove I was assembling would need to be approached skeptically, and supplemented with reporting on the ground as often as possible.” Spoken like a true journalist! Khan began planning more trips to Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

Khan managed to find many locals who were willing to give their consent to be interviewed. “Consent involved more than just asking people whether they were willing to be interviewed or quoted,” writes Khan. “I would explain my objectives and told them specifically where their words, faces or voices might appear. I told them about my goal of making the American public more informed about the consequences of our wars.”

In Part One of her series, Khan mentions that only a

few reports of innocents dying in U.S. air raids ever make it into the news, in part because the media rely on self-reporting by the Pentagon: “Except for the rare instances of revelation and subsequent outcry, the Pentagon’s brief published reports on the minority of cases it finds credible are the only public acknowledgment of the air war’s civilian toll.”

What Drives Good Journalism?

Although she doesn’t make a big deal of it, the ethical and moral issues that drive Azmat Khan—or any true journalist, in my view—can be heard in various comments that you have just read. Such as the plea from a grieving resident of Mosul, who pleaded with Khan: ‘Can you uncover the truth about why this house was hit?’”

Or the almost parenthetical reference to “my quest to understand why American bombs landed where they did.”

Or on the need for on-the-ground reporting: “It was clear from just one reporting trip that there was something very wrong with the coalition’s air war.”

Or on how conclusions can be drawn from dogged persistence: “My hunch that something had gone very wrong [with U.S. intelligence] had been correct.”

Or on the role of journalism in challenging the “conventional wisdom”: “The divergence between what I saw in Tokhar and what I read in the Pentagon’s official report made me understand that the document trove I was assembling would need to be approached skeptically, and supplemented with reporting on the ground as often as possible.”

Only when speaking to the victims did Khan explicitly refer to the goal of her project: “I told them about my goal of making the American public more informed about the consequences of our wars.”

We can see why Khan is doing what she is doing with this series on the civilian casualties of America’s air wars. In the next essay I take a look at what it is, exactly, that she’s doing, and how she is doing it. ♦

“They Had Never Spoken to a Journalist Before”

In the previous issue of the Notes, I shared much of the content found in the remarkable series on civilian casualties of America’s air wars, published in December by the New York Times. In the essay you just read, I explored the motivation of the reporter responsible, Azmat Khan. But two questions remain: What did Khan actually *do*? We see that she wants to inform the U.S. public “about the consequences of our wars.” But what is involved in *doing* that?

And, secondly, *how* did she go about the journalistic task of reporting a story that—from all indications—many powerful people did not want reported?

What Did She Do?

On one level, what Azmat Khan did is fairly simple: She doggedly gathered information, both by tracking down documents and by interviewing people. I said this is simple. But it’s not easy. Which people? Which documents? Where are they? How does one get one’s hands on these documents? How does one go about talking to these people?

Start with documents. Khan knew that the military had many documents that had never been seen by the public. So she petitioned the Pentagon to release those documents—some of them, anyway—making her requests in line with a law called the Freedom of Information Act, or FOIA. Originally passed in 1966, FOIA was a response to Cold War-era government secrecy and, despite being amended and weakened over the years, has enhanced government transparency immensely. Journalists love it.

Khan made much use of FOIA, and says that documents “were obtained through Freedom of Information requests beginning in March 2017 and lawsuits filed against the Defense Department and U.S. Central Command. To date, The Times has received 1,311 out of at least 2,866 reports — known as credibility assessments — examining airstrikes in Iraq and Syria between September 2014 and January 2018. Requests for records from Afghanistan are the subject of a new lawsuit.”

As the pandemic began to shut things down, Khan says that “I had filed more FOIA requests, and they were progressing. Thousands more pages were rolling in, much faster than any one person could handle.” So, Khan says, “I hired two research assistants, Lila Hassan and Jeff Parrott, former students in the conflict-reporting course I teach at Columbia Journalism School, to help me build out the database further.”

FOIA itself does not always get results so, as mentioned, there were lawsuits. For example, “By June 2018, Centcom [that’s the United States Central Command, the branch of the Pentagon in charge of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, among other things] had denied expedited processing for every single request I submitted. So with lawyers from the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, I filed a lawsuit. By early October, the first batch of casualty reports arrived. Among them were documents from 35 strikes in Iraq in which the Pentagon concluded it was credible that civilians had been killed.”

But documents are only a part of the task. Khan noted that “Publishing a military document only allows you to see through its eyes in the sky — and from everything I had now learned through my years of reporting on America’s air war, that view alone is usually a dangerous one.”

“In 35 credible cases, it was possible to locate the precise impact area and find survivors and witnesses on the ground. Then the reporting included touring wreckage; collecting photo and video evidence; and verifying casualties through death certificates, government IDs and hospital records. Frequently the reporting closely matched basic information from the documents. But the detailed accounts that ultimately emerged from the rubble ground were often in stark contrast to what had been assessed from the air.”

Khan noted a “disconnect between the documents and the reality on the ground” which she surmised “was also the reason the Centcom tally of civilian casualties was consistently lower than what I was finding.” For example, “The Pentagon claimed that [one] 2016 strike had killed as many as 24 civilians, ↗↗↗

→→ but some estimates ran much higher than that, possibly higher than 200. That would make the civilian death toll from [that] strike larger than any other from a coalition airstrike during the war.”

So, while the “records contained much that was revealing about the nature of America’s air war,” Khan knew that she had to talk to witnesses and victims. As she puts it, “The documents were especially illuminating when combined with independent ground reporting, something the credibility assessments themselves usually did not contain. None of the investigations, I noted as I turned the pages, included the kind of survivor interviews I had been conducting.”

In addition to the time and expense of repeated trips to the region, simply knowing where to go was a time-consuming and confusing task, in part made possible by the relentless work of the British transparency group Airwars:

“By late 2020,” Khan says, “I also had a new type of information, one that could improve my on-the-ground reporting: After years of negotiation, U.S. military officials had finally provided Airwars, a British nonprofit, with military coordinates of the impact sites for all of the credible incidents of civilian casualties it had acknowledged. Until then, it was often difficult to figure out the precise location of a strike listed in the Pentagon’s releases or detailed in the assessments. The releases might say that a particular strike occurred ‘near Mosul,’ but this was practically useless. Even after I started receiving documents, precise location data was almost always redacted, as were most maps or images that would allow me to geolocate them. Now, because of Airwars, I had coordinates that purported to be accurate within 100 meters. I could use this data to go to a site where I knew a strike occurred and start asking questions.”

How Did She Do It?

Khan listens to the victims of the U.S. air wars. The perpetrators apparently do not: “Before interviews, I was always extremely clear that I was only a journalist, not an aid worker or a representative of an NGO [Non-Governmental Organization]. I explained

that I could not be an advocate, but I could share their accounts, and — if they wished — I could include their contact information in my correspondence with the U.S. military. To my knowledge, none of them were ever contacted by a civilian casualty assessment officer.”

Khan tells of going to Barang Afghanistan in 2018 “visiting 15 households in this hamlet of mud homes and farmland, and also interviewing tribal elders and others across Band-e-Timor. Most said they had never spoken to a journalist before. The accounts they gave — consistently and reliably, in hourslong interviews — help explain how America lost the country, how its war of airstrikes and support of corrupt security forces paved the way for the Taliban’s return.”

Here’s a paragraph for people who think that journalists are nothing more than propaganda machines:

“I understood that what people told me could be incorrect, whether because they misremembered or because they were not telling the truth, so I did everything I could to reduce the possibility of misinformation. There were several ways I did this. Though I was now going in with a clear picture of what the military said happened, I always kept this to myself at first and took pains not to ask leading questions. I also always sought out multiple perspectives from eyewitnesses. And I made sure that no one ever had advance notice that I was coming. That way, no one could set up interviews or scope out a place ahead of time. For a given site, there was sometimes extensive information from eyewitnesses in open-source materials that I could read ahead of time, but I was scrupulous about not contacting these individuals over Facebook or Twitter before I arrived, because I knew this could lead to a wider awareness that I was coming and potentially bias the work. Evidence could potentially be doctored; stories could be aligned. Meeting people unplanned at the site would give me the most reliable testimony.”

Every journalist who dares to go beyond talking to those who drop the bombs and talk to those on whom the bombs fall faces immense challenges.

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How? *from page 5*

The following words, with which Khan concluded her first article on America's air wars, offer us a hint not only of the technical difficulties involved in getting the story right, but of one of the terrible dangers such journalists face. And that's the danger of a broken heart.

Here's Khan talking about a 2018 trip to Afghanistan:

“A father killed in an airstrike while running for the forest. A nephew killed as he slept with his flock of sheep. An uncle shot by American soldiers as he went to the bazaar to buy okra for dinner.

“At the sound of helicopters, Hajji Muhammad Ismail Agha's sons had bounded for the desert. The ‘foreign helicopters’ fired on them. One son, Nour Muhammad, was killed; the other, Hajji Muhammad, survived. ‘How could the planes tell the difference between a civilian and a Taliban?’ the father asked. ‘He was killed just a little far from here. I watched it happen.’ None of these incidents were mentioned in Pentagon press releases. Few were tallied in United Nations counts. So isolated from the Afghan government were residents that when asked for their loved ones’ death certificates, they asked where they might obtain them. Instead, to verify deaths, The Times visited tombstones, in graveyards littered across the desert.” ♦

“Quote” of the Week: “A less Robust Business of Journalism”

The majority of professional journalism is still funded by newspapers. An estimated 90% of publishers’ revenues worldwide still come from print, digital revenues are in many cases growing only slowly, and, where they exist, public service media are under considerable pressure. Most of these existing forms of funding for professional journalism will decline as we continue to move to a more digital media environment, leading to further job cuts in newsrooms.

These business challenges are obvious to everyone in the business of news but, strikingly, not at all obvious to the public – our research documents that 68% are either unaware of the business challenges the news industry faces or believe that most news organisations are making a profit from digital news.

The sustainable business models for digital news ... generally support far leaner newsrooms than those historically found in legacy media. While national politics is likely to continue to be the subject of significant coverage, many more specialised areas have seen significant cuts, as has local news.

The risk here is not simply retrenchment and less coverage of many important issues, but also that a less robust business of journalism is more vulnerable to media capture by the state or politically motivated owners, and to pressure from advertisers.

The above words are from the UK-based Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, in a 2019 Report called “More Important, But Less Robust? Five Things Everybody Needs to Know about the Future of Journalism.”

<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/five-things-everybody-needs-know-about-future-journalism>

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