

**BAD INTEL, BAD JUDGMENT**

# On the Eve of Congressional Hearings, New Evidence About Alleged U.S. Massacre in Somalia

A series of incidents involving Special Operations Forces in Africa raises questions about oversight, effectiveness, and whether a coherent strategy exists at all.

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MOGADISHU, Somalia—New evidence in [The Daily Beast investigation](#) of a U.S.-led ground operation in Somalia last August further implicates U.S. Special Operations Forces directly in the death of 10 civilians. Among the new elements is an interview with a Somali National Army soldier who says he saw the Americans firing on unarmed victims. The Pentagon has said all those killed were “armed enemy combatants.”

The operation was one of three major incidents involving U.S. forces in Africa this year that have raised questions surrounding U.S. military engagement across the continent and prompted the House Committee on Foreign Affairs to hold a hearing, scheduled for Thursday morning, to discuss U.S. counterterrorism efforts in Africa.

According to the Somali National Army (SNA) soldier who was with the American special operators during the incident, the team approached the farm where the incident occurred with eight U.S. soldiers in front of the 20 Somali National Army soldiers and four U.S. operators behind them.

The Americans in the lead then fired on two unarmed people who were preparing tea, after which Somali National Army soldiers rushed forward and fired on three farmers in a

nearby shed. The U.S. soldiers began firing at others in the farming village who came out of their homes.

The account by the SNA soldier, who spoke on condition that his name not be used, corroborated earlier Daily Beast reporting and contradicts a U.S. Africa Command press release issued 30 minutes after The Daily Beast published its months-long investigation into the incident.

The Daily Beast had chronicled in considerable detail the way in which a team of U.S. Special Operations fighters carried out a ground operation acting on human intelligence that came from local rivals of those killed on the farm, and against the advice of the commander of the African Union Peacekeeping contingent in this region in Somalia.

The AFRICOM press release stated that, “After a thorough assessment of the Somali National Army-led operation near Bariire, Somalia, on Aug. 25, 2017 and the associated allegations of civilian casualties, U.S. Special Operations Command Africa (SOCAF) has concluded that the only casualties were those of armed enemy combatants.” (The full text of the brief AFRICOM statement was [appended to our story](#) after its release.)

AFRICOM’s response denying the allegations of civilian casualties caused outrage among Somalis, few of whom doubt the farmers killed were civilians, and has put increased pressure on the Somali Federal Government to release the findings of its own investigation. According to multiple sources familiar with the Somali government inquiry, it determined the farmers were civilians who were wrongly killed, but it was buried as the result of U.S. pressure.

None of the over two dozen Somali National Army members, clan elders, surviving farmers, or security and government officials interviewed in the course of The Daily Beast investigation were contacted by U.S. investigators, raising questions in Somalia as to whether any of the investigation’s sources included those outside the U.S. military.

# “We’ve been fighting al-Shabaab for a decade, why haven’t we won?”

— Question put to Pentagon by Trump transition team

On Monday, citing The Daily Beast investigation and other concerns, Rep. Ted Lieu (D-CA) announced he had successfully called for a hearing by the House Foreign Affairs Committee to be held Thursday morning to look at U.S. counterterrorism efforts in Africa. “From combating Al Shabaab in Somalia to Boko Haram in Nigeria,” Lieu said in a statement, “U.S. military personnel are deployed across the African continent with little public scrutiny or awareness. It is critical that we bring more transparency to the years-long work of U.S. Special Operations Forces in sub-Saharan Africa, their rules of engagement and the broader regional strategy.”

This year alone:

[A U.S. Navy SEAL was killed](#) in Somalia during a ground operation in May. It was the first U.S. combat death in the country since the infamous Black Hawk Down incident which occurred during the Battle of Mogadishu in 1993.

In [Niger](#) in October [four U.S. soldiers](#) were killed in what had been described as a “low risk” mission when their convoy was ambushed by armed militants. (It is telling that after the incident U.S. senators said they [had no idea](#) some 1,000 U.S. troops had been deployed in Niger).

In Mali in June a Green Beret [allegedly was murdered](#) by two Navy SEALs when he discovered the SEALs were pocketing cash from their informant fund in Mali.

And U.S. Special Operators appear to have fired on civilians in Somalia, acting on intelligence that the operators had not sufficiently vetted in an operation that had been advised against by local partners.

Each of these incidents has raised questions not only about oversight and effectiveness of U.S. military strategy in Africa, but also if a coherent strategy exists at all.

TWO YEARS BEFORE U.S. Africa Command was established in 2008 to centralize the structure for U.S. forces across Africa, just one percent of all U.S. Special Forces deployed overseas were operating on the continent.

But with the new command structure came a new way of operating across Africa.

As in Iraq and Afghanistan, where Gen. David Petraeus' revised counterinsurgency field manual, published in 2006, was perceived as an effort to turn U.S. soldiers into armed humanitarians building roads, digging wells, and constructing schools for local populations, AFRICOM officials imagined the troops they oversaw would act in a similar capacity; the continent had long been considered a backwater harboring terrorist groups and underdevelopment was assumed to be a major cause for recruitment.

But in Iraq and Afghanistan the difficulties of implementing the armed humanitarian approach became apparent as millions were poured into projects that had little impact, and the same problems became evident in Africa.

As a result, AFRICOM's *raison d'être* swung to the other end of the counterinsurgency spectrum to focus on building local military capacity and supporting those troops with air strikes and in ground operations.

In the course of a few years, AFRICOM had in effect jettisoned the idea of preventing terrorism and winning the hearts and minds of those on the African continent through development, instead assuming that local support would follow U.S. efforts to rid countries of their terrorists, the numbers of which had continued to spread across the Sahel.

By March 2015, when Gen. David Rodriguez, then commander of AFRICOM, addressed the Senate Armed Services Committee, the number of U.S. military trainings missions,

exercises and operations across the continent was 674, an astonishing 300 percent increase in the number of annual operations and training exercises since AFRICOM was established. This year that number has skyrocketed to 3,500 total activities per year, a 1,900 percent increase from 2008.

## **“Show me the strategy. We’re waiting to see a strategy.”**

**— Skeptic attached to U.S. mission in Somalia**

But as military operations across Africa have rapidly increased, the creation of a new coordinated strategy across Africa, and political oversight over AFRICOM’s strategy on the continent, have not. Congress has not voted on engaging U.S. troops in these preventative war efforts and the House Committee hearing Thursday will be the first hearing to discuss U.S. counter-terrorism in Africa.

WHEN PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP took office this year, his transition team seriously questioned the massive investment the Department of Defense had poured into the continent. In January, [\*The New York Times\*](#) obtained a four-page list of questions related to U.S. involvement in Africa, which questioned the value of humanitarian aid as well as the purpose of U.S. military involvement. One question simply asked, “We’ve been fighting al-Shabaab for a decade, why haven’t we won?”

The question raises a compelling point. Al Shabaab is composed of an estimated 3,000-5,000 soldiers operating on a shoestring budget with rudimentary military equipment and operational capacity compared to groups like the so-called Islamic State. It has not shown the capacity to carry out terror attacks outside the East African region nor strong linkages to Al-Qaeda, to which it pledged allegiance in 2012.

Yet the same lack of sophistication and strong international ties that defy the notion that the group is a direct threat to American lives also created the perception that the war

against Al Shabaab is a winnable one, according to an individual working with the U.S. mission in Somalia.

So, rather than draw down U.S. troops in the country, Trump's administration doubled down on its efforts to defeat Al Shabaab.

In addition to rapidly transforming the U.S. military base in Baledogle, a former Soviet Airstrip now occupied by American forces and the SNA Special Forces called Danab which the U.S. trains, in March the Trump administration also designated parts of Southern Somalia an "area of active hostilities" where war-zone targeting rules apply.

The change in policy freed U.S. Special Operators from the Obama-era drone strike rules known as the Presidential Policy Guidance, which required interagency vetting of airstrikes and that the target pose a direct threat to American lives.

The Joint Special Operations Command or JSOC had for years carried out such defensive drone strikes across Somalia, but with the new guidelines, as well as leadership by Lt. Gen. Austin Miller, who led a contingent of the Delta Force in the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu, the pace of strikes has increased dramatically. So far this year, the U.S. has conducted 31 confirmed drone strikes, with 10 in the last month.

Still, drone strikes alone do not a coordinated strategy make. And though the U.S. plans to grow Danab's few-hundred-soldier battalion, to date Danab acts more as a supplementary force to U.S. Special Operators, with Americans planning operations, preparing Danab for those operations, and commanding Danab forces in the course of them.

Whether the force has a future as an independent entity which can dramatically turn the tide in the war against Al Shabaab remains unclear. But these two tactics—build up Danab and ramp up drone strikes—are the most visible facets of any U.S. military strategy in Somalia.

Apart from that, the consensus among those working with the U.S. mission is that a coordinated strategy between the Department of State and Department of Defense to defeat Al Shabaab in Somalia is scattershot, if one exists at all. “There is no U.S. strategy here,” says one individual working with the U.S. mission in Somalia. “Show me the strategy. We’re waiting to see a strategy.”

IN THE ABSENCE OF a coherent policy dictated from higher authorities, U.S. Special Operations Forces on the ground have inherited the de facto authority to create their own strategies when determining which operations to carry out in the countries to which they are deployed.

As Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) [told reporters](#) in October, after Defense Secretary Jim Mattis briefed members of the Senate Armed Services Committee on U.S. military operations on the continent: “You’re going to see more actions in Africa, not less; you’re going to see more aggression by the United States toward our enemies, not less; you’re going to have decisions being made not in the White House but out in the field.”

It is likely for this reason that the team of U.S. Special Operators in Somalia was neither deterred by nor in violation of any specific guidelines when undertaking the campaign to capture Bariire town and the surrounding area without the support of the African Union peacekeeping force in the region, and using a partner force of regular SNA troops, widely known to be under-trained and under-equipped, rather than Danab.

The extensive Daily Beast investigation into the incident found that U.S. Special Operators had acted on human intelligence which, had they been aware of the local context, would have been obviously questionable if not directly misleading.

**“The briefing the interpreter gave us was that... we could start shooting to protect the Americans.”**

## — Somali National Army soldier who participated in Aug. 25 incident

Specifically, the U.S. Special Operations team had used information provided by Biyomal clan militia leaders who are active rivals to the Habar Gidr clan of the owners of the farm, which was later raided by U.S. and Somali troops.

In light of additional reporting, new evidence has emerged regarding the collection of information on which the U.S. team later acted, and what occurred on the farm during the operation itself, an account which contradicts that offered by AFRICOM.

According to two SNA soldiers who retook the town of Bariire alongside U.S. Special Operators on August 18, the day after the joint U.S.-Somali force retook the town a Biyomal clan militia approached the SNA commander, Sheegow Ali Ahmed, and the U.S. Special Operators, offering them camels and information on Al Shabaab activities in the region.

The meeting took place under a tree on the south side of Bariire town, where the Biyomal militia leader, “Cornel,” SNA Commander Sheegow, an estimated eight U.S. Special Operators, their interpreter called “Bashir,” and a few Digil clan elders met to discuss the security landscape in the region.

According to one SNA soldier present, Cornel explained that all the farms from the outskirts of Bariire town down the Shabelle River Corridor were havens for Al Shabaab and he requested arms and ammunition from the Americans to help fight the extremists. The Americans responded by telling Cornel they could not support clan militias, but could only work Somalia’s official national army.

Locals in the region and in Mogadishu know the farms Cornel described are primarily Habar Gidr owned farms, which Biyomal militias have been raiding for years. It appears Cornel was trying to convince the Americans they were Al Shabaab territories in order to gain support in an effort to drive the Habar Gidr out of the region.



In the days that followed, Cornel and another Biyomal militia leader, “Wafo,” repeatedly called Sheegow—phone calls which were observed by one of Sheegow’s SNA soldiers. This soldier suspects Cornel and Wafo were continuing to give Sheegow misleading information, suggesting the Habar Gidr rivals’ farms in the area were actually Al Shabaab safe havens.

During this week, the SNA also arrested one man from the farm which was later raided, an arrest that Gen. Sheegow himself confirmed. After the Americans questioned the farmer over the course of a few hours, they handed him over to Sheegow, who then released him because it had been determined he was a civilian.

The farmer called one of his clan elders later that day to recount the interrogation. He explained that the translator, Bashir—who is known to have worked with U.S. Special Operators in a 2016 drone strike which resulted in the death of 22 non-Al Shabaab combatants—had asked him how he came to be on that farm and how the Habar Gidr came to own the land.

Not only are these likely to have been personal questions posed by the interpreter, Bashir, rather than by Americans he was translating for, but the information in which Bashir was interested also suggests he held a bias against the Habar Gidr clan.

Whether the result of Bashir coloring the information he was translating to the Americans or the Biyomal militias sufficiently misinforming Sheegow, six days after retaking Bariire town, U.S. Special Operators decided to attack the Habar Gidr farm adjacent to the town.

**“Dying would be easier than listening to those lies.”**

**— Brother of a farmer killed in the Aug. 25 incident**

To do so, they requested 20 SNA soldiers from Sheegow's 40-man force leave the SNA Forward Operating Base and come to the American encampment next door. They instructed these soldiers to leave their cell phones in the SNA outpost, likely in case any SNA had ties to local Al Shabaab militants whom they might call to warn them about an imminent attack.

According to an SNA soldier who went to the American encampment, the U.S. Special Operators gave the SNA bottles of water and dry rations, though they did not offer any details about the operation the SNA had been pulled to assist. Later that evening the SNA soldiers and 12 U.S. Special Operators started walking in the direction of the farm, a journey on which the SNA were instructed not to load their weapons, likely in case of an accidental discharge.

The same night, one of the farmers called his brother to tell him he had spoken with Sheegow and Sheegow had promised he would soon bring together the elders of the Habar Gidr and Biyomal in an effort to reconcile the two clans and end the local fighting in the region. Whether Sheegow was deliberately deceiving the farmers or had not been informed about the U.S.-led operation on this particular farm, remains unclear.

THE U.S.-SOMALI team walked around the town and through a neighboring farm, stopping at two in the morning on the outskirts of the farm that would be attacked that morning as American vehicles arrived.

There they waited three hours until U.S. Special Operators instructed the SNA to load their weapons and warned them that they were in enemy territory. "The briefing the interpreter gave us was that the SNA should not shoot unless there is heavy fire, then we could start shooting to protect the Americans," the SNA soldier says.

The group then walked quietly through the banana trees to the center of the farming village. They moved with eight U.S. Special Operators in the lead, the 20 SNA soldiers behind them, and four additional U.S. Special Operators in the rear.

As they reached the center of the village, they saw two people making tea, a black pot for which was later visible in photos taken of those killed after the incident occurred.

According to this SNA soldier, the U.S. Special Operators fired upon and killed those two people using suppressors, though the slight noise from the shots or the moving group of soldiers stirred three people who had been lying down in a shanty home nearby.

The shanty home was described both by the soldier and a farm owner as a three-walled structure, the one open side facing where the two had been preparing tea. According to the farmer, this is where the farm's guards usually slept and where the farmers had placed all their weapons per the instruction of Sheegow the week prior. Sheegow had them to put their weapons together in one house so they would not be confused with Al Shabaab militants by surveillance drones if they were seen carrying any arms. The guards, the farmer explained, were there to protect the farm against warthogs who occasionally tried to devour their watermelons as well as the Biyomal militia, which had attacked the farm at least four times since 2013.

After killing the first two people making tea, the SNA soldiers saw the guards in the shanty house move. Those guards, seeing armed soldiers in their midst, began to reach for the weapons that were kept in the home. Both the farmer and the SNA soldier later explained the men likely thought the SNA and American soldiers were members of the Biyomal militia and moved to protect the farm. But before the guards could fire any shots, the SNA rushed towards the men and killed them. According to the SNA soldier, "the SNA guys expected whoever got there first could keep those guns, everyone was rushing there to get the guns."

With rounds of AK-47 fire piercing the quiet morning, other farmers began coming out of their homes to see what was happening. They were met with an onslaught of gunfire from the U.S. Special Operators. By the end of the estimated 20 minute operation, nine farmers were dead, one was badly wounded, and others had also sustained serious injuries.

The SNA soldier confirms what two survivors told The Daily Beast: that the American Special Operators then instructed SNA forces to get the weapons from inside the shanty home and place them next to the bodies of those killed, so the U.S. Special Operators could take photos.

The weapons, described to The Daily Beast by this SNA soldier, as well as another SNA soldier who arrived later on the scene, and two farmers from the village, were a mix of old AK-47s and old hunting rifles, the not known to be used by Al Shabaab. “Al Shabaab couldn’t use those rifles because they don’t have the ammunition to use them, it is hard to find in Somalia,” one of these soldier said. He also confirms what the survivors described: three Americans taking photos of the bodies, two of whom used their cell phones and one of whom used a small black camera.

After the American soldiers took photos, one of the surviving farmers, who had run to Bariire town when he heard the sound of gunshots, arrived at the scene with a truck of SNA soldiers Sheegow had sent with him to determine what had happened on the farm. As these soldiers arrived, they explained that some of them knew the farmers and that they were civilians. U.S. Special Operators quickly left the scene.

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**— U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham**

Returning to their base in Bariire, the U.S. Special Operators met with Sheegow, a meeting which both Sheegow and the two SNA soldiers confirmed. After the meeting, Sheegow arrested three SNA soldiers who had taken part in the operation, releasing them a few hours later. Sheegow did not offer The Daily Beast an explanation for the arrest.

Both the SNA soldier who was on the operation and the soldier who arrived later have told The Daily Beast that in the aftermath of the attack, the Somali National Army refused to take possession of the arms collected at the farm, as is the usual protocol, because doing so would implicate them in the killing of civilians.

According to one clan elder as well as Gen. Sheegow, after the incident Somalia's Chief of Defense Forces (CDF) Gen. Mohamed Ahmed Jimale requested the arms be returned to the farmers, which the U.S. Special Operators agreed to, but only if the CDF signed a document saying he believed that the arms belongs to Al Shabaab. The CDF refused to sign.

AS NOTED, 30 minutes after The Daily Beast's initial investigation into this operation was published last week, AFRICOM issued a press release denying the allegation of civilian casualties and instead stating those killed were "enemy armed combatants." It did not offer any additional details as to the content of its investigation nor the people it consulted to come to that conclusion.

Not only will the now added pressure for the Somali government to release its report likely strain U.S.-Somali diplomatic relations, but the U.S. denial has caused many Somalis to question U.S. involvement in the country, an outcome which will likely undermine U.S. mission objectives in Somalia.

"My opinion about the United States has changed a lot," says one farmer whose brother was killed in the operation and preferred to remain anonymous for fear of retribution by the American or Somali government for speaking out. "I used to think that America is a country that respects human rights, it's where people have human rights, but now I am looking at them and I see they know nothing about the human rights, they will kill civilians and lie about it to the people."

The former deputy director of the Somali National Intelligence and Security Agency, Abdisalam Guled, also believes that the Americans' response denying those killed were

civilians will be a recruiting tool for Al Shabaab because “it is as clear as day these people are civilians” and denying that will give Al Shabaab ammunition to paint American troops as callous about the loss of civilian lives..

Today that farmer who lost his brother is responsible for taking care of the 12 children his brother left behind, and now without weapons to protect the farm, the land is vulnerable to Biyomal militias in the region.

“What [the Americans] are doing is not right, what they said last week is wrong,” he says. “Dying would be easier than listening to those lies.”