

Somalia's New War Order

For the first time, members of Danab and the CIA-trained Somali intelligence unit known as "Alpha Group," who agreed to be interviewed on the condition they were not identified, gave detailed accounts of the extent to which the Americans are now involved in training forces in a country from which they fled two decades ago.

"Americans are completely different from the Somalis," said the recently graduated Danab member. "They study you psychologically. Also, if you tell them you have a goal in mind, they really try to help you reach that goal. Even when we graduated, they gave us a bonus, which was not on the books."

The Pentagon confirmed to the Toronto Star that there are five U.S. members of a "military co-ordination cell" that was deployed in October 2013.

"(T)he Defense Department maintains a small presence in Somalia primarily to co-ordinate U.S. efforts to counter the threat from Al Qaeda and [Al Shabab](#) with related efforts of the international community," U.S. army Lt. Col. Myles B. Caggins III, wrote in an email to the Star.

Caggins said the State Department "co-ordinates" with the U.S.-funded civilian contractors in the country and acknowledged Danab's existence when questioned about the new unit.

"The Danab company receives training on law of armed conflict and international humanitarian law, consistent with international standards," Caggins wrote.

But along with training, Danab and the Alpha Group, which is known locally as "Gashan," meaning "the Shield," the U.S. also gets an important partnership with both Somalia's army and intelligence wing.

For critics of the program this is seen as an incursion on Somalia's sovereignty — establishing a two-tier system for the military and security groups. Others praise the co-operation and standards set by foreign forces.

There's no doubt, the so-called *Black Hawk Down* era, where Western powers abandoned the war torn East African country following the 1993 deaths of 18 U.S. service members and downing of two Black Hawk helicopters, is long gone.

A city within a city has grown in the last four years inside Mogadishu's protected Oceanside airport compound. Civilian U.S. contractor Bancroft, which was the first to set up base here, is now flanked by compounds for the United Nations, British embassy and European Union advisers.

The Central Intelligence Agency also has a quiet presence here. For the last few years, they have trained and equipped the Alpha Group, the intelligence unit commandos who live in their own fortified compound near the airport.

Mohamud Abdulle, the chief of staff for Somalia's former prime minister, said in an interview last year that the Alpha Group had become a "fundamental part of Somalia's security and intelligence architecture" and report to the country's intelligence force, known as the National Intelligence and Security Agency.

"Its responsibilities include special operations, securing areas and protecting VIPs," Abdulle said. "In the short time since it was created, Alpha Group has been strikingly successful."

One intelligence official in Mogadishu with knowledge of the team said there are no more than 150 members, but estimates vary. Some of the members reportedly defected from the Shabab, but the team's membership is a closely-guarded secret — fighters only appear in public with their faces covered by tan-coloured balaclavas and often with sunglasses and gloves.

Alpha Group also conducts what are known as "snatch and grab" operations — targeting terrorism suspects and interrogating them within the confines of the airport compound.