



Egypt's Thunderbolt Forces: Image and Reality

OE Watch Commentary: The Thunderbolt Forces (Quwwat al-Sa'iq) are the Egyptian military's most prominent and best-known special forces units. They are consistently exalted by Egyptian media and are highly capable at self-promotion and image control. Historically, they are considered among the region's most competent special operations units. For example, a "ranking" of Arab Special Forces published on the Arabic-language version of *Sputnik* last year considers the Thunderbolt Forces the region's most capable (The "rankings" are based on a video posted to YouTube from an account focused on Arab military affairs). Not surprisingly, this view is particularly prevalent in Egyptian media. The accompanying excerpt from *el-Mogaz*, for instance, cites the former head of the Thunderbolt Forces, who confides that these forces are the "top-ranked globally" and are "doing a much better job in fighting terrorism than the US Marines did."

The accompanying excerpt from *Egypt Defence Review*, written in the summer of 2017 by a local commentator of Egyptian military affairs, presents a dissenting view on the Thunderbolt Forces. The article asserts that "only chauvinistic Egyptians can claim that they're the best in the Arab world with a straight face. When the reality is the progress made by the Iraqi Golden Division, Jordanian JSOC, UAE SOF, and Tunisians means Egypt shouldn't even be in the conversation anymore." The Thunderbolt Forces, he claims, "have not moved in line with the world wide SOF community. Instead they still train and plan for a conflict with a conventional enemy." This, he continues, is because the Egyptian Armed Forces are "stuck in 1973" and consequently "unable to strategically plan for current and emerging threats." While the Thunderbolt training program may be producing soldiers "who are physically robust, motivated, and have a unique ethos" they are nonetheless "poorly skilled for what should be elite Special Operations Forces soldiers in the 21st Century."

There has been recent evidence that graduates from the Thunderbolt Forces academy, located in the Nile Delta northeast of Cairo, are capable of taking on a conventional adversary; unfortunately for Egypt, that conventional adversary happens to be the Egyptian Army. Egypt's most notorious jihadist rebel is a man by the name of Hisham Ashmawy. His elusive network has carried out several successful ambushes and assassinations. Ashmawy graduated from the Thunderbolt Forces academy but was subsequently tossed out of the army for fears that he was becoming radicalized. One of Ashmawy's key associates was killed by an Egyptian airstrike in October 2017. Named Emad al-Din Abd al-Hamid, he was also a Thunderbolt Forces graduate who had been expelled from the military for suspected religious radicalism. Earlier that month, Abd al-Hamid orchestrated an ambush that killed many Egyptian police and military personnel in the country's Western Desert, near the border with Libya. **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

"... the progress made by the Iraqi Golden Division, Jordanian JSOC, UAE SOF, and Tunisians means Egypt shouldn't even be in the conversation any more..."

Source: أفضل 5 قوات خاصة عربية
"5 Top Arab Special Forces," *Sputnik*, 1 April 2017. <https://goo.gl/EopZjZ>

#1: Egyptian Special Forces

...In order to join the Thunderbolt Forces one must be extremely physically fit and submit to a special medical examination. The units under the command of the Thunderbolt Forces are initially submitted to the highest levels of training at the Thunderbolt command in Inshas. Those who the school selects for commission are placed in the Thunderbolt units and Egyptian Naval Special Units. The training of the group takes 34 weeks without pause, in addition to the medical examinations.

Source: خبير عسكري يكشف ترتيب قوات الصاعقة المصرية على مستوى العالم
"Military Expert Reveals Global Ranking of Egyptian Special Forces," *el-Mogaz*, 16 August 2017. <http://www.elmogaz.com/node/407188>

The former head of the Thunderbolt Forces, General Mustafa Kamel, said that these forces are the best in the world. Despite their relatively recent formation (1957) these forces are the top-ranked globally... The Americans have gained great experience from Egyptian forces during joint exercises, especially in terms of fighting in the desert... He noted that the forces are performing excellently in the Sinai, doing a much better job in fighting terrorism than the US Marines did...

Source: "Egyptian Special Operations Forces: A Thunderbolt Introduction," *Egypt Defence Review*, 4 July 2017. <https://egyptdefreview.wordpress.com/2017/07/04/egyptian-special-operations-forces-a-thunderbolt-introduction/>

Initial Training follows the same syllabus as the rest of the Army with recruits being drilled to instill discipline and taught basic skill at arms, section tactics, and field craft. The duration of basic for Conscripts is little over a month and a half. As a result of the short training time and a syllabus that hasn't had any major changes in decades, those who pass have a very basic grasp of small unit tactics, combat marksmanship, and in general being a SOF soldier. So, it would not be a leap to say that Egyptian Conscripts in general across the majority of the Army are poorly trained riflemen...

In the end the School produces Conscripts who are physically robust, motivated, and have a unique ethos but are poorly skilled for what should be elite Special Operations Forces soldiers in the 21st Century...

This inexperience (among other factors) has lead the Thunderbolt to a position of increasing irrelevance. Whereas other nations innovated and improved the Thunderbolt has been the same for decades, it's indicative of a country and an Armed Forces that seems to be eternally stuck in 1973 and is thus unable to strategically plan for current and emerging threats...

The performance of the Thunderbolt (and the Army at large) in the Sinai proves they were and still are utterly unprepared for counter insurgency operations, they have not moved in line with the world wide SOF community. Instead they still train and plan for a conflict with a conventional enemy.

It has come to a point now where only chauvinistic Egyptians can claim that they're the best in the Arab world with a straight face. When the reality is the progress made by the Iraqi Golden Division, Jordanian JSOC, UAE SOF, and Tunisians means Egypt shouldn't even be in the conversation any more.