

# Ambrosia

## Chapter 13

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### AFTER MONTHS OF STALLING, TEHRAN MOVES TO RETAKE BAN- DAR ABBAS

By Nigel Chapman

Camp Grizzly, just outside of Bandar Abbas, Iran (AP)—The Iranian government, supported by the Coalition, will make its push to reassert control of its largest southern port, the AP has learned.

For a third day in a row, Coalition forces and aid workers at the USAID fresh water distribution center on Jazirah ye Qeshm have been harassed by rocket fire from Bandar Abbas, held by struggling but steadfast anti-government insurgent forces.

**“The sooner we can re-establish control of this key southern port, the sooner we can establish a throughput of key essential services to the Iranian people struggling through years of civil war.”**

**—BGen Michael Brubracher,  
USMC, Commander,  
Regimental  
Combat Team 6**

Clean water continues to be a scarce resource, and the ability to provide potable supplies has become a service that defines those with influence and those without. The portable, solar-powered desalination system delivering safe water to anyone, anywhere—introduced by a foreign, non-interested international relief agency—serves to undermine the agenda of those who would use water as a means to an end or as leverage to attract, or conscript, members to their cause.

Meanwhile, in Bandar Abbas, relief supplies intended to feed tens of thousands of families daily have stopped flowing. The disruption is thought to be the work of Jaysh Al-Shanameh, the same anti-government insurgents who have repeatedly attempted to disrupt Coalition efforts in the south and who refuse to negotiate a cease fire to allow aid to come into the city. In particular, the USAID facility on Qeshm Island—which services the southern portion of Iran with clean, potable water—has been targeted repeatedly since the Coalition first arrived months ago.

“Initially, we were seeing progress,” one former senior administration official told the AP under the condition of anonymity. “But as the Coalition seeks to prevent itself from becoming mired in a quagmire, efforts to create an effective pro-government military force in the south have been disappointing. Now, after months of partnering, we believe we have the right core of leadership that can instill confidence in the men and in the mission.”

The operation, dubbed “Noble Guardian,” which includes local loyalist militias backed by Coalition forces, seeks to

unseat key nodes of anti-Ayatollah and anti-government insurgent factions from its largest southern city. However, the sheer size of this megacity, which has remained fairly unaffected by the war in the north, is making uprooting these maligning factions difficult. Soaring urban mega-structures serve as *de facto* fortresses, each with their own social structures, governance, and agendas.

The U.S. military, reluctant to get bogged down in a long campaign, has been absent for the most part throughout the hostilities in Iran. Behind the scenes, however, one official tells the AP that between 2,000–3,000 US military personnel are now involved in the conflict. As the EU-led Coalition forces embark upon Operation Noble Guardian, the US is letting its presence be known.

**I** can't believe I was supposed to be home six months ago, Aidan thought to himself as he looked out over the vehicles and personnel that comprised the outer cordon that he was supervising. Despite his momentary mental lapse of self-loathing, the combined force of Marines and Iranian para-military personnel continued to fortify their isolation of the objective area with VCPs (vehicle control points) along the high-speed avenues of approach (roadways) and support-by-fire positions focused outward, intended on preventing anyone from reinforcing the sequestered JAS (Jaysh Al-Shanameh) forces still inside Block 5 of Bandar Abbas.

Well, at the rate we're going, maybe I'll actually “pin on” out here and get a sweet, tax-free pay raise, he thought once again to himself, referring to his recent selection to the rank of captain and the current prolonged promotion rate of Marine officers. Shaking off the mindless wanderings a Marine tends

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to experience while sitting idle, Aidan spied a large convoy approach from the horizon.

“All Blue Team victors (vehicles), this is Hollywood.” Lt Rosado announced over the platoon tactical net. “I’ve got eyes on a large convoy approaching from our 12 o’clock. I think it’s the inner cordon, but I have no comms yet, so stay frosty.”

As each of his vehicle commanders in his multi-platform platoon “rogered up” over the net, Aidan again let his mood get the better of him, thinking, *Please be the inner cordon*. Ensuring that the heavy machine guns from his mixed ACV/JLTV/Iranian up-armored SUV blocking position were set to repel, or at least deter, any interlopers from interfering with this op, Aidan was reminded of the weeks of preparation and shaping ops that he and his Marines had to do to get to this point; a point that could mean the end of hostilities in Bandar Abbas and a ticket home.

After the donnybrook that he and Capt Mack’s company found themselves in while establishing a lodgment on the southern shores of Iran near Bandar Abbas, momentum in “breaking the back” of JAS had, for lack of a better word, stalled. Capt Mack was heard around the COC using much more colorful language to describe their involvement—and the leaders who came up with the strategy—but the fact of the matter was still America’s reluctance to get bogged down in another counter-insurgency fight in the Middle East, regardless of the strategic impacts that “losing” in Iran would have for U.S. interests globally. But for now, the American people and her leaders were very content to be providing a much needed resource—clean water—to the people of southern Iran, and the military strategy did not branch out much past the protection and continued production of this capability. Regardless of how much military leadership insisted that establishing and maintaining clear “standoff” from enemy interference facilitated this agenda, DC was adamant about not increasing the military footprint in the highly visible, and sought after, city of Bandar Abbas. Until about two months ago, that is.

Working through Tehran via the State Department in the north combined with key leader engagements with the Iranian Army, police, and local leadership by the Task Force alongside combatant commanders, it was agreed that removing JAS’s stranglehold on the key logistics node in the south needed to end if Tehran were ever to regain its influence nationally. And the only way this was going to sell to “John and Jane Lunchbox” back in the States was if any and every operation in the campaign against JAS had a very clear and

nation partner. Although a common trend among the local militias was to “promote” whichever warlord or paramilitary leader to the rank of colonel without merit or justification, in the case of Col Ebrahimi, the commanding officer of the HSF (Hormozgna Security Force), his accomplishments on the battlefield in every way legitimized his position, regardless of the nature of how he attained his rank and title. It didn’t hurt that he and Aidan got along great. Col Ebrahimi completed his education in the U.S., receiving his baccalaureate

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omnipresent Iranian face. The *moshkeli*, or “problem,” was that the campaign already had a Iranian face—the JAS. Any operations against “the Army of Al-Shanameh,” if not conducted with appreciation for the nuances of the area, would be seen as either Western imperialists attempting to crush a nationalist movement for its own gain or Tehran attempting to smother any attempts from its people to have an ideology that wasn’t the Ayatollah’s. It didn’t matter that JAS was clearly well-funded and well-equipped by some foreign entity, nor that their brutal tactics and human rights abuses used to keep the people of Bandar Abbas in-line were completely contradictory to a so called “grass-roots, nationalistic revolution.” Regardless of who was really pulling the strings of JAS leadership, be it a nation, nations, or mega-corporations working deals under the table, they had a capability and proficiency level that required more than just a charismatic leader with an emboldened militia to expel JAS from Iran’s most populated city.

But at least the Coalition did have the charismatic leader with the emboldened militia.

Col Reza Ebrahimi was as gregarious, strong, and tactically proficient as Aidan could have hoped for in a host-

degree from Cal State Northridge and his masters’ in education from UCLA. Having spent time in Los Angeles, he had a strong affinity for American cinema and TV, which was evident in his immediate recognition of Lt Rosado as the wise cracking Sgt Martinez from the show *Eagle, Globe, and Anchor*. They hit it off immediately, as Reza would constantly ask for stories about Aidan’s time in Hollywood, and Aidan would in turn ask for stories about Reza’s return to Iran to help his country piece itself back together. Aidan not only respected Reza’s experience as a combat-hardened tactician but also his ability to continue to pursue his goal of returning his mother country back to a strong and unified Iran.

Aidan jumped down from his troop compartment and moved over to the gunner’s station so that he could use the remote weapons station’s high tech optics suite to get better “eyes on” the approaching vehicle convoy. He knew immediately by the markings on the up-armored SUVs and technical vehicles that it was Col Ebrahimi and the rest of his HSF.

“As-salamu ‘alaykum, aqa,” Aidan said into the Bluetooth handset in his hand, using an unsecured radio frequency the task force had allotted for use

between the Marines and the Iranian forces. Even though Reza spoke English better than most Americans, Aidan liked to use as many local greetings and phrases as he could when interacting with the local forces. This phrase, a common Muslim greeting meaning, "Peace be unto you, sir," was always well received even though Aidan was not Muslim and clearly not Persian.

"Wa'alaykumu as-salam, doostam," Reza's jovial voice came over the vehicle's loud speaker. This phrase is the typical response, meaning, "And upon you, peace my friend."

"Welcome to the party, aqa. I thought maybe you guys had changed your mind about this op and were off trying to win the war without me." Aidan quipped.

"No win would be a victory without you, Captain," Reza jabbed back, a reference to Aidan's recent selection and future promotion as a term of endearment. "So, are guys ready to do this, or should we come back later?"

"Aqa, we've been here for 30 minutes now. I think even the bad guys figured you weren't coming and went back to bed."

"For you Marines, when you say a time, this is the time. But this is Bandar Abbas. 30 minutes late is still early. The bad guys might be in bed, but that's only because they never got out of them in the first place."

"Inshallah, aqa," Aidan replied, putting down the handset and hoping to God that the HSF commander was right. Aidan knew Reza was as tactically and technically proficient as they came, but as Col Ebrahimi's convoy pushed through the outer cordon toward the crisis area's epicenter, he hoped that Reza's comment was just bravado and not complacency. Watching them establish the inner cordon and prepare for their assault, he feared the latter.

Aidan leaned over his ACV's gunner to get a better look at the 3D holographic imagery being provided by the JBC-P3 projector. The Joint-Battle Command Platform version 3, or JBC-P3, is a live stream satellite geo-location tracker that not only identifies friendly and enemy units on a digitally enhanced three-dimensional map, but allows for increased situational awareness through

the synchronization of the overhead surveillance from the JBC-P satellites with the "on the ground" optics suites organic to the vehicles, to which networked users can interface with the imagery and update unit locations, enemy formations, even micro-terrain, to keep each user updated real time as to what is happening on the battlefield. This complex capability provides the network with a realtime information network of overhead imagery overlaid with the thermal and FLIR systems of the vehicle turrets, combined with updates from the users to paint a very detailed and thorough picture. Aidan watched intently as Col Ebrahimi and his HSF assault force moved to isolate the area known to be a safe haven for

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JAS leadership as they transit the area. What Aidan was seeing, however, was not the tactical employment of a combat professional, but that of a unit that was in dire need of increased rehearsal time.

"Aqa," Aidan said, once again picking up the handset, "you need to close 'the loop'. There's a huge gap to the north of the zone, and with my guys facing outboard, some of the bad guys can easily slip through the cracks."

"Don't overthink this thing, Captain," Reza replied flippantly. "It is morning, the sun is barely out, we are in position and the enemy is fast asleep in their beds. We will have this thing done before the first cup of chai is poured."

"Well Aqa," Aidan continued his fearfully skeptical tone, "maybe the enemy is sleeping so soundly because they know that there is a reaction force protecting their morning slumber."

"We are moving into our assault position now. I'm sorry to cut you short, but I would like to be back at the camp before the waffle bar at the chow hall closes." Reza said dismissively. "If they have guardian angels, then I have mine (referring to Aidan and his Marines). I'm willing to bet you are

better equipped at making sure we are successful than they are. HSF-6 out."

With that, Aidan could see on the JBC-P3 imagery that the HSF assault force had begun its breach into the JAS headquarters building.

"Switch to the HSF net," Aidan commanded his gunner. Still staring into the JBC-P3 holographic projection of the cordoned crisis area, Lt Rosado was able to track the movement of his allied militia with a combination of visual and audio command and control functions. As he watched the images of the HSF soldiers rush toward the breach site located inside an adjoining alleyway connected to the backside of the target building, Aidan noticed a flicker in the projection.

"What was that?" Aidan asked aloud, not directed at anyone in particular but loud enough to catch anyone in the ACV's "dungeon" attention.

"What was what, sir?" his gunner asked.

It happened again.

"THAT!" Aidan pointed out excitedly.

"That was weird," his gunner pointed out, clearly as confused as his platoon commander. "Let me check the connection."

After a brief visual diagnostic of the cabling and quick troubleshoot of the software, the Corporal shrugged and said, "Everything seems to be working fine."

But the audio streaming from the HSF internal net told a completely different story. Although the bulk of the communications being transmitted was in Farsi, it was clear that they were not just sitting idly in their stack, milling about smartly as the imagery would have them believe. Staring intently into the projection, Aidan asked, "How long has the HSF been stacked at the breach site?"

"A few minutes now, I guess."

“A few minutes?!” Aidan yelled frantically. And then the flicker happened again.

“We’re being looped!” he yelled, realizing now what was happening.

“Being looped” was a slang term for having one’s communications jammed or tampered with. The term was derived from an old concept that referred to the tampering of a security camera, to which a hacker would introduce a “loop” of their choosing into the video feed to hide whatever was happening in real time without the victim being aware. Decades ago, this could only occur by physically manipulating the input/output cabling. In this case, Aidan was referring to a new technology that could digitally usurp the waveband and not only cut off or disrupt both visual and audio capabilities, but could replace them with whatever manipulated stream or medium that the hacker desired, leaving the victim with the impression that they were still functioning normally.

Immediately picking up the handset, Aidan anxiously tried to raise the HSF commander on the net. “HSF-6! HSF-6! This is Hollywood. What is your position?”

“We are inside, and all is quiet. Proceeding to the target location. Now if you would kindly clear the net, we might be able to do this thing without you waking everybody in the building up. Just enjoy the show from the comfort of your tactical RV (recreational vehicle). HSF-6 out.”

Being that the HSF were using less than up-to-date equipment, their stuff was almost tamper proof, no one had any equipment arcane enough to breach their communications. It was as if it were so old, it was new. Aidan knew then that he was the one who had been breached. Rushing to the communications suite, Aidan engaged the EW (electronic warfare) countermeasure system. With the flick of the switch, the ACV’s JBC-P3’s imagery dissolved and reappeared, with a completely different projection than the one they had just been privy to. Now, Aidan could see that Col Ebrahimi and his HSF were about midway up the building, snaking through what he

assumed was the staircase at the heart of the structure.

Although the unobserved progress of the militia was unsettling, what made him panic was the thermal imagery of what looked to be a platoon-sized element moving rapidly from underneath the target building to reinforce the slumbering occupants inside. By following their path of entry, Aidan knew that there existed a subterranean tunnel network that linked all of the JAS occupied buildings so that they mutually supported each other, allowing for the quick entry and exit of personnel and material. In addition, this subterranean system facilitated the rapid reinforcement of the central hub—the target building—without exposing forces to observation or precision guided munitions.

“HSF 6! HSF 6!” Aidan screamed.

After a few moments of silence he tried to raise the assault force again.

“HSF 6, this is Hollywood! I need you on the net!”

Still nothing.

“Reza, if you can hear me, you have tangos approaching rapidly from your rear. They are using a tunnel system and will have you cut off in minutes. Egress the building now while you still can!”

Nothing.

Frustrated, Aidan knew that what he needed to do was the one thing he wasn’t going to be able to do, based on the ROE. But he decided to call the one person who might have even the slightest inclination to give him the authorization he needed.

“Apache 6, this is Hollywood.”

Capt Prophet’s booming voice flooded the ACV’s intercom system, “I’ve been tracking all from the COC, Hollywood, and I knew you would be calling. And the answer is ‘no.’ You are not to go in and reinforce. You are just there to support.”

Capt Prophet had basically become the task force’s current operations officer, given that his company was essentially “scattered to the winds,” and he had the most experience “in country” of any of the BLT’s company grade officers. For this operation, he made sure he was on the COC watch schedule.

“But sir, I—” Aidan started before getting cut off.

“I know you want to go in. I want you to go in. But the ROEs are very specific about U.S. forces entering into conflicts unilaterally. Folks back home don’t want any more American’s coming home in bags over whether or not Iranians can or cannot drink water. It was hard enough to get the Coalition to allow us to even man the cordon.”

“I assume you’re seeing the imagery. You know Col Ebrahimi and his boys are going to get chewed up in there, right?!”

“I’m sorry, but that’s not our problem. This was always meant to be an Iranian mission, so unfortunately that means Iranian consequences. The last thing we need is for you to fold the cordon and then play right into the enemy’s hand by letting these scum bags squirt out of the gap while you’re running all half-cocked on some rescue mission.” Mack continued, “Besides, the QRF (quick reaction force) is ‘oscar mike’ [on the move] in 5.”

“5 minutes?!” Aidan questioned. “This thing will be over in 2!”

“Listen to me Hollywood, this is an order! You will maintain your position. You will continue to isolate that objective. The QRF is on their way and even if it’s the worse-case, you need to keep the bad guys sequestered there so we can just level the whole block if we have to. But YOU WILL NOT MOVE! Is that understood?!”

“Loud and clear. Hollywood out!” Aidan replied insolently. Normally, it’s the senior officer that ends the communications, but Aidan’s sign off was the only act of defiance he was able to muster.

Or was it?

Aidan dropped his head, exasperated by the situation he was in. Switching his comm over to the internal platoon net.

“All victors, prepare to depart. I need a short count in 1 min ...”



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