'Escape is impossible'

It is a destitute, oppressive place, where 70,000 Palestinian refugees are squeezed into one square kilometre and violence is the norm. Ghaith Abdul-Ahad visits Ain al-Hilweh, Lebanon's biggest refugee camp, and talks to the new generation of jihadis whose experience reflects the Islamisation of Arab youth throughout the Middle East

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A PLO gunman patrols the streets of Ain al-Hilweh. Photograph: Ghaith Abdul-Ahad

It is a Monday in early June and four bearded jihadi fighters hide in a bicycle repair shop less than 50 meters from a Lebanese army position at the entrance of Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp, the biggest camp in Lebanon. Around them is a familiar battle scene; the smell of burned concrete mixed with gunpowder, a cloud of smoke rising, hundreds of bullet-holes peppering the buildings. The street is empty apart from an occasional lone fighter who sprints across the road from one position to the other.

The clashes between the jihadi Palestinian group of Jund al-Sham and the Lebanese army had stopped a few hours ago, leaving at least one militant dead and three injured. The army lost two men.

Residents are already on the move, fearing a repetition of the two weeks-old battles raging in another Palestinian camp between another jihadi group - Fatah al-Islam - and the Lebanese army. There, at the smaller Nahr al-Bared camp in Tripoli, to the north of Lebanon, at least 70 people had been killed.

One of the fighters, who is in his early 20s, wearing a black T-shirt carrying the words "Allahu Akbar" and nestling an M16 rifle between his legs, says: "They are cowards those soldiers. This is a Palestinian camp, this is not Israel."

The Islamist group of Jund al-Sham is believed to have no more than 50 fighters. Like other jihadi groups in the camp, some of the fighters are veterans of the war in Iraq. They are flourishing in the Palestinian refugee camps of Lebanon, which have been in place since 1948 when Palestinians fled or were expelled to make way for the creation of the state of Israel. There are 12 such established camps in Lebanon, the most well-known of which, Sabra and

Shatila, were made notorious in 1982 when the South Lebanon Army massacred up to 3,500 people, many of them civilians, under the watch of the Israeli army.

In many respects, Ain al-Hilweh and other camps are the microcosm of a failed Arab state and its anger and politics: packed, crowded, frustrated, hot-housed and surrounded by guards. They reflect the politicisation, the Islamisation and the radicalisation of Arab youth all over the Middle East. Their inhabitants are oppressed and kept poor by badly managed and corrupt regimes; they are hemmed in by visa restrictions and borders that are almost impossible to cross.

For years now the secular factions, which were in the ascendant in the 1970s, have been challenged by the rising star of jihadis and fundamentalists. In the middle lies the besieged nation, filled with anger, mostly at Israel, where many of their families lived until 1948. These are the realities of not only Ain al-Hilweh but of all the Middle East.

Ain al-Hilweh is the biggest of the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, situated in the south of the country on the edge of the ancient city of Sidon, less than an hour's drive from the northern borders of Israel. The name means the "Sweet Water Spring".

Almost 50 years ago, the recently formed UNRWA - the UN relief agency for Palestinian refugees - leased the land around the Sweet Water Spring from the Lebanese government, to provide a temporary shelter for the tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees who were then flooding into south Lebanon.

Six decades and four generations later, the camp looks like every other destitute Arab town; a busy market, houses built from concrete cinder blocks packed close to each other, children and chickens running in the dirty roads between piles of garbage, open sewers, record shops blaring Arab pop music all day, and young men in tight jeans standing at corners staring at other young men in jeans, looking for a fight to break the deadly boring cycle of the day.

Just like the imagined city of the movie Escape from New York, Ain al-Hilweh resembles a huge maximum-security prison. Walls are topped with barbed wire, army-fortified posts and armoured vehicles. As many as 70,000 Palestinian refugees are squeezed into a square kilometre.

The unemployed, the revolutionaries and the fundamentalists roam the streets like gangs. Violence is the norm, and escape is impossible.

Lebanese conscript soldiers, wearing tin helmets and US flak jackets from the Vietnam era, and armed with M16 rifles, stand guard at the checkpoints leading into the camp. Positioned behind them are fortifications made from tyres and barrels filled with sand. They inspect the ID cards of everyone going in or out of the camp. Drivers are asked to open their car boots and journalists, NGO workers, and foreigners have to get permission from the Lebanese military intelligence just to get inside the camp.

"Sometimes we call it Gaza II," I was told a few weeks ago by a very thin young Palestinian student as we negotiated our way through the checkpoint.

But when I visit the camp again two days after the recent clashes, the main checkpoint is almost deserted. Shaken soldiers inspect my ID card quickly and wave me through. The ground is covered with empty bullet casings, a reminder of the heavy fighting.

A few metres on from the Lebanese army, there is another checkpoint. This one is manned by soldiers of the armed struggle: two old men, carrying Kalashnikovs, dressed in combat fatigues, red berets and trainers. They are veterans from the PLO's heyday of the 1970s.

Now you are in "Palestinian territory".

The graffiti and posters start from there, pictures of Yasser Arafat, the (secular, PLO) Palestinian leader next to those of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin - the spiritual leader of Hamas, who was assassinated by the Israelis.

The camp's main streets, which are usually crowded with people and motorbikes, are empty. Gunmen with different shapes of beards and of the different factions stand at street corners, under insignias of their militias. The street looks like a bazaar of old and new revolutionary brands: PFLP, DFLP, Fatah, Hamas and so on.

Each neighbourhood carries the name of its inhabitants' original village or town in Palestine and shares a certain political loyalty to one of the factions. Most of the camp's residents today have never visited their families' homes, which are mostly in Galilee in what is now northern Israel.

Hind is a young Palestinian woman and a leftwing activist. She doesn't wear a hijab, and always dresses in baggy trousers and a red, green and black scarf. She lives outside the camp, in the city of Sidon, but she was born in Ain al-Hilweh and knows every tiny alleyway. She can jump between a very thick Palestinian accent and Lebanese. She spends her time in the camp, organising activities and exhibitions. I asked her one day what is it like to be called "a Palestinian", though her father was born in a refugee camp in another country, and so was she. She told me how, after the Israeli withdrawal from the south of Lebanon, she went with some friends to the border. "We stood on the edge of the fence, Palestine was there in front of us," she says. "The air that came from Palestine was different, it was sweet, it came from our lands."

A few metres down the main road there is the military HQ of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Marxist militant group that was responsible for spectacular attacks in the 1970s, such as the Leila Khaled hijacking of an El Al plane.

The HQ is a small room with two camp beds. The commander, a thin man in his late 40s, sits on one of the beds, his red beret resting on the top of his skull, and wisps of hair falling on to his forehead. He drinks bitter coffee and fiddles with his phone. Around him, four other veterans of the faction's decades of wars gather around a small table. They are all dressed in combat gear; everyone is on high alert because of the clashes.

"The camp is made of different factions and everyone belongs to a faction," the commander tells me. "I can't walk with you to the end of the street because PFLP turf stops a couple of blocks from here. Each faction has its territory."

"It's so easy to form a faction and a militia here," he says. "We are poor, our parties are not paying us, we can't leave here and we can't travel, so if someone pays a young kid $500 a month, of course he will join any movement. Most of those jihadis were once fighters with us and other Palestinian factions."

He thinks for a moment. "If you come to me and give me a $100,000, I will split from the PFLP and form the PFLP: Believers' Army. It's so easy."

The contrast between the ailing, ill-equipped and ill-fed fighters of the old "secular" factions and muscular, bearded and well-equipped jihadis is huge.

I go to see a member of this new generation of radicals, a fighter and commander of Usbat al-Ansar, a group of jihadist Palestinians in the camp, called Abu Omar. We first met more than a year ago when I was told by his friends that he was "very funny and very sweet ... he makes jokes all the time". The Lebanese government is said to have sentenced him to death three times.

I walk towards the area where the clashes between the Lebanese army and the Islamists took place, a sort of a no-man's land between the edge of the camp and the Lebanese army checkpoints. "Tameer" is the Islamists' turf, where most of the men on the streets have long beards and some wear shalwar kameez and black prayer-caps, the signature dress for the Salafi-jihadi Islamists in the region.

The area has also become a safe haven not only for jihadis fresh from Iraq but also for wanted criminals such as arms dealers.

"Long live the leader Zarqawi," is written on a wall, referring to the al-Qaida commander in Iraq who was killed last year. A photomontaged poster hangs from a light pole, showing a young man holding a rifle in front of a burning US Humvee. It says: "The Martyr, the Lion, the hero, martyred in Iraq in 2005 fighting the crusaders."

I come across two fighters, who are relaxing by the shade of a building and keeping an eye on the frontline. I ask them if they know where Abu Omar is.

"Who wants to see him?" one asks me, still busy eating his ice cream.

I explain that I already know Abu Omar.

They ask me to follow, and we walk through a maze of alleyways into a yard where Abu Omar is sitting, surrounded by his men.

Abu Omar looks like an Arab version of the Scandinavian god Thor. He is tall with huge muscled arms, a thin waist, a thick ginger beard and kinky long hair. Strapped to him are a small machine gun, two pistols and eight magazines. A veteran of the jihad in Iraq, he greets me using Iraqi words.

He once told me that his two new black (Glock) pistols - the kind that the US army is supplying to the Iraqi police - were his "spoils of the war".

He was born in the Ain al-Hilweh camp. His father was born in the camp, too; his grandfather came to Lebanon as a refugee from Galilee when he was a small boy after the 1948 war.

When he was six years old, he got his first classes in military training in a PLO Cubs training camp. "I was 12 when the Israelis invaded Lebanon in 1982," he says. "I didn't do much fighting then but it really helped to shape the fighter in me. We used to carry ammunition to the fighters."

Three years later, he became a fully fledged fighter when Shia factions supported by the Syrians started a two-year battle against Palestinian camps in the mid-1980s, in the midst of the Lebanese civil war.

In the early 1990s he joined the radical Islamist Usbat al-Ansar. But the war in Iraq was a turning point. Instead of fighting against other factions in the camp, they found a better enemy - and like many all over the Middle East, their long-awaited jihad dreams could be fulfilled in Iraq.

Now Usbat al-Ansar is considered one of the strongest factions in the camp; it is flooded with money from the jihadi networks in the Middle East, and has a rank and file made of enthusiastic, indoctrinated young jihadis. The story of their rise and the demise of secular movements mirrors the story of the Middle East.

"I have been fighting since the age of six and I tell you the apostate secular PLO fighters are more courageous than the Americans," says Abu Omar. "At least they don't hide behind armoured Humvees." He says he went to Iraq not as a suicide bomber but to provide training to the Iraqis and to other young Arabs, mostly from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. "Saddam destroyed the Iraqi army: he created a bunch of overweight, corrupt officers who didn't know how to fight."

He says he participated in many attacks against the US and Iraqi army. For a while his group had a base in the northern Iraqi town of Tal Afar until a US-led attack forced them out of the city and he went back to Ramadi. He did two trips of six months each to Iraq.

"People say if I am Palestinian why not go and fight for the liberation of my country instead of fighting in Iraq?" he says. "I tell them it's the same people, we have the Jews here in Palestine and the Americans are there in Iraq. Both are occupations."

He shaved off his long beard and the Iraqis who he met at the border supplied him with a fake ID card. (His Iraqi ID card looks as real as my genuine Iraqi ID card.) He was given a Shia name.

He clearly understands why the jihadists are so successful in the camp. "If the economic and security situation was stable, the jihadi movements almost don't exist," he says. "It's only when there is a security vacuum that jihad flourishes. Just like in Iraq."

The ice-cream fighters are standing in silent respect behind Abu Omar, part bodyguards, part disciples. One of them, a tall and muscled man with a pistol strapped to his waist, claims that he started the fight with the Lebanese army the day before.

"They [Lebanese soldiers] taunted us, they told us 'We will kill you like we are killing Fatah al-Islam [in Nahr Al-Bared camp]'," he says. "So I went home with my friend and we got our weapons and started shooting at them." Soon other jihadis joined the fight and a full-scale battle raged for hours. "Abu Omar had taught us how to fight," the young fighter told me.

I first meet Saleh in a sit-in at a PFLP rally at the entrance to the camp, a protest demanding the release of leaders in Gaza who had been jailed by the Israeli army a few weeks earlier.

Plastic chairs are organised in a big circle, a man is reading speeches over a microphone, coffee is served in plastic cups, the walls are decorated with pictures of leaders and logos, and a Kalashnikov rifle with a red piece of cloth wrapped around the top is laid next to the jailed leader's picture like a bundle of flowers.

A banner hanging on the wall reads: " We will fight for Palestine generation after generation."

Saleh is sitting with his friends under a poster of another dead leader. He is 20 years old, but he looks 16. His hair is dyed orange-blond on top. A small wooden map of Palestine hangs around his neck. "This is from inside," he says, referring to the parts of Palestine that became Israel in 1948 - a mythical place for those in exile so long. "From Jaffa." He holds tightly to the little piece of wood as if it is a piece of Christ's cross.

Like most of the young men here he is unemployed and had dropped out from school when he was 12. He joined the Marxist Palestinian group the PFLP; his father, uncle and mother were all communist.

"I wake up in the morning and then stand around with my friends," he says, in the filthy PFLP office with its threadbare sofas. "It's so boring here. Even the people I meet I have met every day of my life. We have talked about everything."

"Do you go out of the camp?" I ask him.

"No."

"Why not? The sea is very beautiful near here."

"I don't like to feel like a fish out the water. I don't like going out - every time we are stopped by that checkpoint the Lebanese soldiers they look at you as if you are a piece of filth."

In theory Palestinians can leave the camp freely but in practice they are subjected to draconian controls, especially after events in Nahr al-Bared. At the hint of any problem involving Palestinians in Lebanon, the army seals off the camp.

For the past six decades, Palestinians in Lebanon have been at the very margins of society and have difficult relations with the Lebanese people, accused by some as being the cause of the civil war and fought against by every faction at one point or another. They are subjected to discriminatory laws: their movements are constrained, they are banned from owning or inheriting property and they are prevented from working in 72 specified jobs. This means that most of the young Palestinians here are unemployed, and those lucky enough to work can only get jobs as barbers, taxi drivers and construction workers. They live a besieged life.

The atmosphere of lawlessness inside the camp, meanwhile, makes it the preferred refuge for jihadis and other militiamen, many of whom are wanted by the Lebanese authorities, which have no power inside the camp. (They signed security arrangements with the Palestinian factions at the Cairo agreement in 1969.)

I walk to Saleh's house. The walls are bare concrete blocks, and his mother, a former leftwing revolutionary, is sitting in the courtyard peeling potatoes. A hijab is tightly wrapped round her head.

Saleh's room tells the story of all the revolutions and defeats in the Middle East. It is tiny - three by two metres.

There is a small bronze bust of Lenin, a red flag, a picture of Che Guevara and two portraits of Hassan Nasrallah, the head of the Shia Islamic group Hizbullah.

It might be surprising that a secular leftist could be so enamoured of a religious party such as Hizbullah, but this is common throughout Lebanon and the Middle East. "He is our hero now," he says, pointing at the cleric with his black turban and bushy beard.

Saleh's journey is explained to me a few days later when I meet another Palestinian in Beirut, a fighter in his 50s and a hard-core Marxist, his face is lined with wrinkles. "I have never lost my political compass," he says. "Wherever the Americans and the Israelis are, I am on the other side. So if Hizbullah and the Iranians and the Islamists are against the Americans now, so I am an Islamist."

Is this another reason why the Islamists are doing so well? I ask Abu Obaida, another leader of jihadists Usbat al-Ansar. "All the other movements have proved their failure," he says. "The secularists, nationalists and the communists they have all failed, the hypocrisy of their rhetoric has been exposed."

In the office of a secular faction, a senior official tried to explain it better.

"We have young men who have nothing, no hope of a nation, no hope for the right of refugees to return, nothing but the two streets of the camp. With this situation I wouldn't be surprised if half the camp becomes jihadis. Ain al-Hilweh, this is your perfect Failed State."