

A German motorcycle club has joined the fight against Isis. But are they actually helping? Sam Rowe rides out to meet them

PHOTOGRAPHY:
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The bikers battling Isis

In recent months, global news has practically become a stream of advertisements for evil. Journalists are beheaded in snuff films; children indoctrinated with frightening ideologies at home and abroad; entire Middle Eastern towns trapped with no food and water, or worse, executed en masse.

But while the rest of the world has been paralysed by a mix of

fear and anger at the despicable actions of Islamic State (AKA Isis/Isil), one motorcycle club has vowed to do something about it.

"We can't just stay at home and watch TV," says Azad 1%er, president of German biker group Median Empire, speaking with *ShortList* in a secret Dutch location. "This is not a joke, we cannot stay at home when such bad things are happening. Median Empire is fighting the enemies of humanity." 

➔ For decades, the phrase 'motorcycle club' (MC) has been a byword for organised crime, but Median Empire is looking to change this toxic image. After first embarking on aid missions in Iraq, the group followed Dutch bikers No Surrender in waging war against Isis extremists in Syria. "We learned that to save lives you need not only humanitarian action," claims Azad. "Sometimes you must also be able to kill."

Back in Europe, it seems these leather-clad mercenaries have been given all-but permission by the authorities. "Joining a foreign armed force was previously punishable, now it's no longer forbidden," said Dutch public prosecutor spokesman Wim de Bruin last year. In Britain, a number of ex-servicemen are heading to the region to support the Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG).

But are gun-toting vigilantes the best solution? Or do they embody a twisted *Dad's Army* mentality: men on the fringes gripped by a misguided, even suicidal, impulse to help? Five

"IF YOU SEE WHAT HAPPENS THERE, IT MAKES YOU ANGRY. IF YOU ARE ANGRY, YOU DO NOT FEAR"

months after Median Empire launched its military operation, I've been invited to find out.

EMPIRE BUILDING

Following months of negotiations, *ShortList's* photographer and I finally arrive at Median Empire's monthly club meeting, at a pub outside Eindhoven. The address is sent via an encrypted website that immediately destroys all trace of the message, and I'm told that revealing the precise location, or even a detailed description of its interior, could compromise safety. On arrival I notice some members carrying walkie-talkies, others metal detectors (not to mention the occasional blade and axe handle), with each attendee placing their mobile phone in a Lidl carrier bag for the duration of the event. Security and secrecy is paramount.

There are no motorcycles parked outside today, but the bikers hide in plain sight. Dressed almost exclusively in black, members wear patches signifying their rank, from entry-level titles such as 'Hang Around' and 'Prospect' right up to 'Median Empire Army' and '1%er' (a retort to the American Motorcyclist Association's claim that only 1 per cent of bike enthusiasts are outlaws). Although national president Azad is a self-confessed atheist, the MC takes in a variety of

faiths, ages and nationalities.

As 30 or so members gather around a pool-cum-conference table in the saloon bar, commander-in-chief Azad arrives. Dressed in a camouflage jacket, black boots and patch-heavy leather waistcoat, his menacing stare is betrayed by a warm voice as he greets each of his followers with an embrace and a kiss on each cheek. Hells Angels these ain't.

As Azad starts proceedings with a battle cry, recited back in perfect unison, the screen door is pulled shut – we do not sport enough patches to be party to such matters – and I meet Median Empire's guest of honour. Leo Jansen, a 70-year-old from Rotterdam, was introduced to the MC after they learned his son Richard – a Dutch soldier who'd joined YPG efforts in Syria – was paralysed in a mortar attack.

"These guys are special," Jansen enthuses. "The hospital Rick is in has one nurse for 74 patients. If you need the toilet in the night and you can't stop it, you

have to wait in your own sh*t.

"The leader came to us and said, 'Can I help?' I said yes, we need people. Now they visit Rick every day, and help me look after him, because they are Kurdish. For me, these people are my sons."



Having served with the French Foreign Legion, Richard Jansen is one of many trained soldiers supporting the Kurds – an ethnic group of more than 30 million people spanning Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran, yet without a recognised state to call their own. His father is close to tears when recalling his own near-death encounter – driving to the Syrian border to rescue his wounded son.

"In the moment, danger did not enter my head," he says. "But when my son was still there and I was here, I asked one of my protectors, 'Give me your gun – Isis will never get me alive. Or my son.'" Jansen pauses, fixing me with a stare. "Do you know what that means? I would shoot my own son." He stops, struggling to find the words. "It still hurts," he says.

SIDEBAR WORDS: ALEX CHRISTIAN; ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS: MEDIAN EMPIRE SOCIAL MEDIA SITES, PA

I'm finally granted an audience with the MC's enigmatic leader. Azad founded Median Empire in 2011 and his orations sit somewhere between a military chief and a religious preacher. I address the elephant in the room: why is a German motorcycle club waging war against Isis in Syria?

"Median Empire has its own ideology," replies Azad. "We believe there are some things between every human – to be good or bad. Now you have people from all over the world joining this devil army, and they want to take Kurdistan in their hands. They want to make us their slaves, so we cannot be happy with it – we must fight."

GANG WARFARE

Like two-thirds of his troops, Azad has Kurdish roots and visited Iraq last year as part of Median Empire's aid campaign. Since then, the group has fanned out across Iraq – in Sinjar and Kirkuk – and through Syria's autonomous Rojava region. And despite having a mere 11 members currently on operations, a lack of gear (the MC is crowd-sourcing donations for night vision and bulletproof vests) and the proximity of Islamic State ("On one side of the street is an Isis flag, on the other is our people."), he claims his soldiers have no fear.

"I wasn't scared," he says. "If you are here and you think about the situation in Syria, you might be scared, but if you see what happens there, it makes you angry. If you are angry you do not fear."

"There are young girls and women being sold as slaves. Small children are being beheaded, just because they have another religion. We want to fight for a better world for your children, for my children, for his children. That's why we do not fear."

Among the bleakness, a gallows humour permeates. Explosions, Kalashnikovs and camo gear notwithstanding, you would be pushed to believe the light-hearted clips shot in Syria and shared online are against the backdrop of war. And, despite his surly exterior, Azad can't help but smile when sharing his nickname for Isis: orcs.

"It's from *Lord Of The Rings*," he says. "We say the Peshmerga and YPG, they are elves because they fight for humanity, but orcs want to bring darkness to this world."

The pop culture references don't stop there: "Isis is fighting with ideology," says Azad. "We've all seen *The Matrix* – Agent Smith, he touches you and you are also Agent Smith."

But despite its quest to win hearts and minds as a result of its

intervention, Median Empire is viewed with scepticism by its native police force. Erich Rettinghaus, chairman of the police union in Germany's North Rhine-Westphalia region, claimed several of the MC's members have been tried in connection with organised crime, and that their presence in Syria might actually be a thinly veiled warning to rival gangs.

Azad, however, says the mission will not end until he can "sleep without thinking about the children, the women, the beheading". He says his men receive their training in Syria, in keeping with European law, and believes more people should join the fight against Islamic State. Even rival motorcycle clubs.

"We need more 1%ers," he says. "Like you, like me, bikers are good people. Sure, in every club you have criminals – elves and orcs – but everyone who believes in freedom should go there and kick these orcs' asses."

Yet the war rages, and its flow of grisly stories beamed directly from the wreckage shows no sign of abating. And it's a matter of opinion whether Median Empire Motorcycle Club is really keeping humanity safe from the vile jaws of extremism or is, in fact, just so much macho posturing.



HOW TO SPEAK BIKER

A MOTORCYCLE CLUB GLOSSARY

1%er
Non-law-abiding riders, identified by diamond patches.

Back warmer
A girl riding on the back of a motorbike.

Bubble gum machine
Patting the top of the helmet to signal police are ahead.

Fast riding award
A speeding ticket.

Church
A motorcycle club's weekly meeting.

Giggle gas
Nitrous oxide – used for an instant power boost.

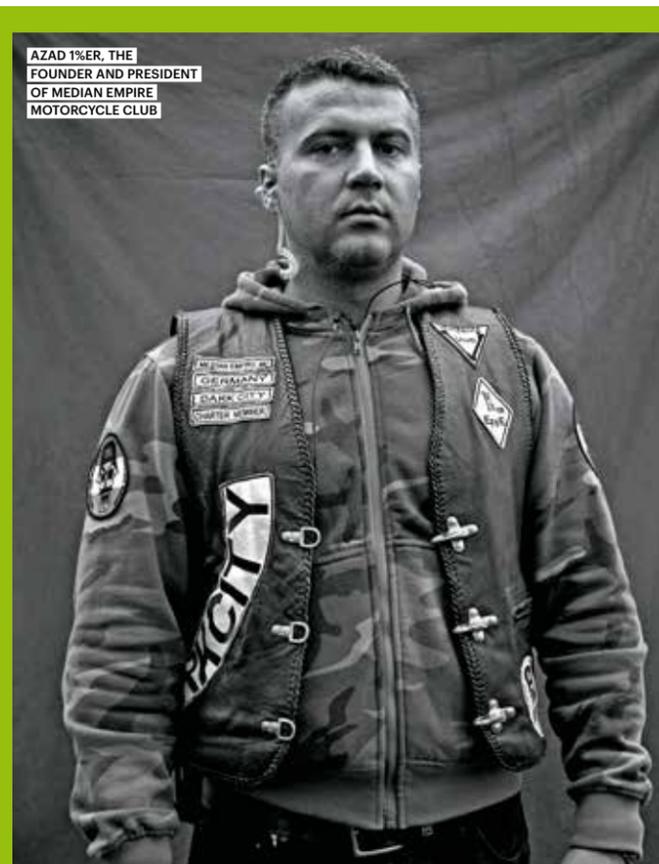
Grocery getter
A biker's car.

Cage
A non-biker's car.

Nomad
A biker who travels between their club's chapters without one affiliation.

Horizontally park
To crash.

Waxer
Those who only ride their bikes at the weekend – and only as far as their driveway.



AZAD 1%ER, THE FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT OF MEDIAN EMPIRE MOTORCYCLE CLUB



EACH MEMBER WEARS PATCHES TO SIGNIFY RANK



MANY OF THE GERMAN BIKER GANG HAVE KURDISH ROOTS

ITS REGULAR MEETINGS ARE SECRETIVE AFFAIRS



DESPITE THE RHETORIC, SOME STILL SEE THE CLUB MORE AS MOBSTERS THAN MERCENARIES



THE MEDIAN EMPIRE MOTORCYCLE CLUB GATHERS IN A PUB NEAR EINDHOVEN