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“Let us be alert to the season in which we are living. It is the season of the Blessed Hope, calling for us to cut our ties with the world and build ourselves on this One who will soon appear. He is our hope—a Blessed Hope enabling us to rise above our times and fix our gaze upon Him.” Tozer

Conservative Christians Just Retook the United Methodist Church

The mainline denomination voted on Tuesday to toughen its teachings against homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and LGBTQ clergy. It must now decide whether it will stay together.

EMMA GREEN FEB 26

Delegates at the United Methodist Church General Conference react to the defeat of a proposal that would have allowed pastors to perform same-sex weddings and LGBTQ people to serve in ministry in The United Methodist Church has fractured over the role of LGBTQ people in the denomination. At a special conference in St. Louis this week, convened specifically to address divisions over LGBTQ issues, members voted to toughen prohibitions on same-sex marriage and LGBTQ clergy. This was a surprise: The denomination’s bishops, its top clergy, pushed hard for a resolution that would have allowed local congregations, conferences, and clergy to make their own choices about conducting same-sex marriages and ordaining LGBTQ pastors. This proposal, called the “One Church Plan,” was designed to keep the denomination together. Methodist delegates rejected its recommendations, instead choosing the so-called Traditional Plan, which affirmed the denomination’s teachings against homosexuality.

This is a consequential vote for the future of the United Methodist Church: Many progressive churches will now almost certainly consider leaving the denomination. It’s also a reminder that many Christian denominations, including mainline groups such as the UMC, are still deeply divided over questions of sexuality and gender identity. While the UMC in the United States is roughly evenly divided between those who identify as traditionalists and those who identify as moderates and liberals, it is also a global organization. Many of the growing communities in the Philippines or countries in Africa are committed to theological teachings against same-sex relationships and marriages.

Self-described traditionalists in the United Methodist Church got the outcome they’ve been fighting for. Still, “I think there’s a lot of grief on all sides,” said Keith Boyette, the head of the Wesleyan Covenant Association and a main proponent of the Traditional Plan, in an interview on Tuesday. Methodists are in mourning for a United Methodist Church that might be on the brink of a mass exodus.

For years, LGBTQ Methodists, clergy, and their supporters have argued that people of all sexual orientations and gender identities should be fully included in the denomination as leaders, and that their families should be recognized. “As someone who has grown up in our Church, as someone who is gay and goes to one of the least religious colleges in the U.S., my evangelism on campus has grown,” said J. J. Warren, a senior at Sarah Lawrence College who hopes to become a Methodist pastor, during the conference on Tuesday. “We have brought people to Jesus ... They did not know God could love them, because their churches said God didn’t ... If we could be a Church that brings Jesus to people who are

told can't be loved, that's what I want our Church to be."

Others in the denomination, however, see LGBTQ issues as a proxy for bigger divisions over biblical teachings. "This is not a political or social kind of difference. It is primarily, for us, a theological difference, and the truth that the Church has been raised up to share," Boyette said. "When a Church begins to fracture around its compliance with its doctrine and ethics and discipline, it becomes a house divided. It becomes dysfunctional."

According to its Book of Discipline, the denomination's collection of laws and doctrines, Methodist pastors are not allowed to conduct same-sex weddings, and "self-avowed practicing homosexuals" cannot be ordained. In practice, however, a number of Methodist clergy and churches have made clear that they disagree with this teaching, at times openly defying it. A lesbian pastor, Karen Oliveto, was even elected a bishop in the Church, a position she still holds even though the denomination's judicial council later ruled that her marriage to a woman violated Church doctrine. At the same time, other churches remain deeply committed to UMC teachings against same-sex marriage and relationships.

The United Methodist Church, which was formed in a 1968 merger between two denominations, has known for a long time that it would eventually have to address these deeply felt disagreements over LGBTQ issues. At the denomination's 2016 General Conference, delegates asked UMC bishops to produce recommendations for how the Church should resolve divisions over LGBTQ issues. Over the next three years, Methodist leaders developed the One Church Plan, which would have allowed local pastors and regional conferences to make their own decisions, keeping the denomination together but allowing for diversity in its ranks.

In order to put that plan into place, however, the bishops needed the support from a body of Methodist delegates from around the country and the world, so they convened this special General Conference. Denominational leaders worked hard to win support: "There's been a full-court press to adopt the One Church Plan," said Tom Lambrecht, an elder at a United Methodist church in Wisconsin who served on the Commission on the Way Forward, a body convened to advise the UMC bishops on what to do, in an interview on Tuesday.

The bishops clearly did not have the support for which they had hoped. During a vote early in the conference, delegates did not put the One Church Plan at the top of their collective agenda. On Tuesday, they definitively voted against any further consideration of the plan. "The fact that that's been rejected shows that our leadership has lost its ability to influence and lead our Church in a way that people are willing to follow," Lambrecht said.

Although the United Methodist Church is often described as a liberal, mainline Protestant denomination, in reality, the body is much more split, even in the United States. In a poll of its American members, the denomination found that 44 percent of respondents described their religious beliefs as traditional or conservative, 28 percent said they are moderate or centrist, and 20 percent identified as progressive or liberal. While the survey didn't ask directly about LGBTQ issues, this is one of the clear theological dividing lines in the denomination. "There are thousands of us in churches ... fiercely committed to a traditional definition of marriage: one man and one woman," said Aislinn Deviney, a delegate from Rio, Texas. "I am a young, evangelical delegate. We young evangelicals want you to know that we are here. And we are striving to leave a legacy of scriptural holiness for generations to come."

Worldwide, those numbers would likely shift even more toward a so-called traditional perspective. The United States accounts for roughly 60 percent of the UMC. At the General Conference in St. Louis, pastors from global communities were resolutely opposed to same-sex marriage and LGBTQ clergy. "The Church in Africa is growing in leaps and bounds because we are committed to biblical Christianity," said Jerry Kulah, a reverend from Liberia. "The United Methodist Church is not a United States Church."

While LGBTQ issues drove the debate at the UMC's gathering, delegates seemed to disagree about something deeper: what Jesus actually teaches about sexuality and how LGBTQ people should be treated in the Church. Conservative delegates argued that their position is a matter of biblical fidelity. "Traditional believers regard scripture as being the ultimate authority," Boyette said. "When it comes to something like our teachings on human sexuality and what the Bible spells out as the boundaries there, those are essentials." Other delegates, however, argued that conservatives focus on this issue to the exclusion of others, such as divorce, and that conservative Methodists are perfectly willing to interpret the Bible's teachings on other issues, such as women in ministry. "I've listened to a lot of people talk about the Bible as though the rest of us don't love the Bible, read the Bible, interpret the Bible, understand the Bible," said Adam Hamilton, the pastor of a prominent Methodist congregation in Kansas who supports LGBTQ inclusion in the UMC.

Now that the UMC has voted to reaffirm its stance against homosexuality and toughen punishments for churches and clergy that violate its teachings, a number of progressive churches might consider leaving the denomination. Before the meeting had even begun, churches from across the theological spectrum had begun looking into this possibility—Daniel Dalton, a lawyer in Michigan who specializes in religious-property issues, says he has talked with more than 700 churches that are thinking about making an exit. In the past, that hasn't always been so simple: While local churches build and run their own congregation, bishops largely have control over what happens to their assets when they want to leave the denomination. "Everybody wants out," Dalton says. "The only thing that's holding them back is that their property could be taken away from them." For some churches, this is about theology and unity. For others, "it's a battle over money," Dalton says.

Iran Inches Closer to its Goal: "Wipe Israel off the Map"

by Majid Rafizadeh March 16, 2019 <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org>

Iran's military activities and clear public threats to annihilate Israel continue to grow in frequency and intensity. These moves not only instill fear, as they are doubtless meant to do; they also threaten to disrupt the international community. With such dire promises of conflict, it would be expected that the international news media and politicians throughout the world would have something to say about this situation. Instead, Iran's continued abusive behavior continues to be cozied up to at worst, or at best, ignored.

One of the core pillars and revolutionary ideals of the Islamic Republic is destroying the Jewish state. It is also one of the religious prophecies of the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and his successor, the current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, that Israel will be eventually erased from the face of the earth. As Iran's theocratic establishment believes that the Supreme Leader is Allah's representative on earth, whatever words or desires the Supreme Leader utters are considered wishes, which must be brought to life by Allah's true believers.

While they progress toward destroying Israel, not only do Iranian leaders believe that they are inching closer to fulfilling a religious prophecy, they also see that they are gaining strategic and geopolitical victories -- in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and in the Gaza Strip. The Deputy Commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Hossein Solimani, recently threatened on Iran's Channel 2 TV that Israel is "vulnerable and bringing itself closer to death".

Solimani recently made it vehemently clear the strategy of the Iranian government, stating:

"Our strategy is to erase Israel from the global political map. And, it seems that, considering the evil that Israel is doing, it is bringing itself closer to that."

In addition, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei recently posted a Twitter tirade against Israel. It stated that the, "the Zionist regime will perish in the not so far future."

This burst of confidence is bolstered by Iran's military buildup in Syria, among other places. The Syrian civil war has been viewed as a perfect environment for the Iranian leaders to advance and ultimately achieve their objective of destroying Israel. Iran has built, or is in the process of building, more than 10 military bases in Syria, some of which are near the Israeli border. Tehran has used this strategic position in Syria to fire rockets into Israel.

While many of the world leaders disregard Iran's evident intentions to destroy Israel, they always seems extremely quick to criticize Israel for actually defending the safety of its citizens. After Iran's unprovoked attacks on Israel and its military build-up in Syria were dismissed by the international community, Israel had no choice but to carry out its own strikes against the Iranian military bases and infrastructure that were threatening their country.

Unfortunately, some news outlets and politicians have been attempting to create a narrative to lead people to believe that the Iranian leaders' threats are just talk. Iran's leaders, however, continue to demonstrate their intentions not only with verbal threats, but with military actions as well. Since 1979, Iran has authorized firing rockets and missiles into Israel, and have also used proxies, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, to attack Israel viciously. Iran appears to have Israel solidly in its cross-hairs.

Apparently in a rush to provide cover for Iran, some world leaders have also, for years, been attempting to tell the public that there is a difference between "moderate" Iranian politicians and the hardliners. Unfortunately, that distinction is make-believe. Iran's current president, Hassan Rouhani, like the previous president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has called Israel a "cancerous tumor." Iranian politicians across the political spectrum (hardliners or "moderates") all agree on one thing: destroy Israel.

The Prime Minister of Hungary, Victor Orbán, previously pointed out the duplicity with which Israel is treated:

"The EU should value the efforts made by the state of Israel for stability in the region. This is of interest not only for Israel but for Europe, too, as it protects us from more and more migrant invasions... The EU's relations with Israel are not rational enough and need to be repaired. Instead of criticizing Israel, we should open the door to cooperation with Israel."

It is mind-boggling that some politicians and governments, including the EU, criticize Israel for its Middle East policy and then turn a blind eye to Iran's military buildup near Israel's border -- all while Iran fires missiles and rockets into Israel from Syria, ships ballistic missiles to Israel's self-declared enemy, Hezbollah, and continues to threaten to annihilate Israel in the near future.

When will the international community begin to take the Iranian government's clear verbal threats and physical aggression seriously? Or would the international community secretly like to see Israel destroyed, under Europe's Orwellian inversion of the words: "the peace process"?

Russia is going to test an internet 'kill switch,' and its citizens will suffer

It's cool -- all the creepy totalitarian countries are doing it.

Engadget.com

Russia is planning to disconnect itself from the global internet in a test sometime between now and April. The country says it is implementing an internal internet (intranet) and an internet "kill switch" to protect itself against cyberwar. The question is, would this actually work?

"This, as a single tactic, would not be sufficient," explained Bill Woodcock, executive director of Packet Clearing House, via email. "But it hugely reduces their attack surface. So in combination with many other tactics, it's a component of a reasonable strategy."

An internet "kill switch" has been in Russia's legislative plans for some time -- though it's not entirely about defense. Russia sees this drastic move as a means to solve the dual issues of defending itself from cyberwar attacks and more tightly controlling its citizens' access to information.

As news of the impending shutdown test came originally from Russian-language newswire RBK (and was sloppily reported), it was easy to get the impression that this was a complete, countrywide internet shutdown.

Rather, the country would use Runet, a sovereign, government-run internal web that would keep citizens connected, but only within the country. Runet would run during internet blackouts in the event of "targeted large-scale external influence." Access to the outside would be cut off, and vice versa, but they would still have email and other things (controlled by the government, obviously).

A national intranet is an IP-based walled garden used as a substitute for the real (global) Internet. Typically, its purpose is to control and monitor the communications of citizens while also restricting their access to outside media. Like in Iran.

After years of rumors, Iran rolled out its state-run intranet in January 2018. As the global intelligence company Stratfor explained, "To access [Iran's intranet], users and website owners must sign up with the government, an arrangement that empowers Iranian officials to coerce internet service providers to comply with their demands." This way, "Iran's government can cut access to the global internet for prolonged periods, as it did during the [pro-democracy] Green Movement protests, without taking the entire country offline."

Another country that controls its population via intranet is North Korea. Its Kwangmyong network is the oldest one we know of, believed to have been instituted in 2000.

Internet blackouts seldom go well for citizens. You may also remember when Egypt disappeared from the internet in 2011. This was during the Mubarak regime protests (including the events of Tahir Square), when citizens staged demonstrations calling out corruption, police brutality, free speech attacks, and various human rights violations. In response, Egypt's government cut off the entire country's access to the internet -- 85 million people.

Syria disconnected its population from the internet as well, in 2011. The first time was for its largest pro-democracy protest. Syria shut off the internet and opened fire, killing more than 72 people, while government forces assaulted towns seen as key to the demonstrations, killing even more.

So, generally, internet blackouts seem to be the favored tool of totalitarian governments that do bad things

to people behind closed doors.

Prior to 2012, a government-forced internet blackout could happen only under certain conditions. That was the year the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) rammed through global regulations that took control of the internet's traffic and took citizen access away from orgs like ICANN and handed it to governments. At the time, Dr. Alexander Kushtuev, ITU deputy director general, worked for Russia's largest national telecommunications operator, Rostelecom.

Not surprisingly, early authors of the regulatory changes -- which the ITU attempted to keep secret -- were from a state bloc composed of Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Sudan, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

That meetings and proposals around the agreement were withheld from public view showed that something was rotten; we only found out about it when researchers at George Mason University created the website WCITLeaks, which solicited and shared copies of leaked draft documents. In fact, one leaked doc showed that the organizers had pre-prepared a public relations strategy and hired consultants to avoid public outcry.

Despite enormous opposition, the ITU set its legally binding agreement into place, making blackouts like the ones in Syria and Egypt a maneuver not impeded by treaties, agreements or any ICANN policies on human rights.

Anyway, Russia got what it wanted. It got all the goodies packed into the 2012 ITU regulations, plus what was needed to set in motion the events we're seeing now. The country has a state-run intranet with a free pass to cut its citizens off from the global internet. And The Telegraph reminds us, "The Russian government has been tightening its grip over the internet since social media facilitated huge protests against Mr Putin in 2011–13."

The purpose of the upcoming cutoff test is to work out the kinks before Russia implements a law introduced last year in its parliament mandating that Russian internet providers use Runet when the country disconnects its citizens from the rest of the world.

Interestingly, the upcoming disconnect experiment is run by Russia's Information Security Working Group, whose member are telcos -- and is presided over by Natalya Kaspersky. Yes, that Kaspersky. She co-founded the namesake security company, and her ex-husband is ... Eugene Kaspersky. He still runs the security company they created together, which was banned by the US government in 2017 over its alleged ties to the Russian government.

The law (called "Digital Economy National Program") dictates that Russian telcos must install technical means to funnel all internet traffic "to exchange points approved or managed by Roskomnazor, Russia's telecom watchdog," according to press. "Roskomnazor will inspect the traffic to block prohibited content and make sure traffic between Russian users stays inside the country and is not re-routed uselessly through servers abroad, where it could be intercepted."

The point of all this is so Russia can enact an internet blackout. For security purposes, it claims.

But would an internet "kill switch" work in times of cyberwar?

Not really. Oracle did a deep dive on this exact scenario and concluded that countrywide internet blackouts (with intranet reliance) actually make a country harder to defend. What makes the internet strong as a system, they explain, is its decentralization. Namely, diversity in infrastructure.

If a country has only five companies with licenses to carry and monitor traffic, then sure, it's a snap for authorities to make a phone call and send the country into a near-instant internet blackout. However, Oracle explains: "This level of centralization also makes it much harder for the government to defend the nation's Internet infrastructure against a determined opponent ... They can do a lot of damage by hitting just a few targets."

Packet Clearing House's Bill Woodcock reminds us that the United States entertained the same idea, of a disconnection protocol, in the 2008–2009 era. The idea was abandoned. Mr. Woodcock told Engadget that a kill switch is "a pretty reasonable thing to test, and to prepare for, given how much the US is putting into cyber-offense, and how little regard the US has for nonproliferation efforts in this area." He added, "Of course, the Russians do offense as well, but at least they have the sense to recognize that they're also living in a glass house."

Soberingly, Woodcock tells us that Russia may be taking cues from its own cyber-attack victims:

The apt comparison to make here would be with the Russian attacks on Estonia in 2007 and Georgia in 2008. Estonia was prepared (in much the same way that Russia is getting to be now) while Georgia was not. The Russian attack on Estonia went nearly unnoticed, from a network user's perspective, while the one on Georgia was nearly totally effective, for a period of several months. The Georgian government had to migrate, entirely, to Google free business services.

I think the thing many outlets are dancing around as they report on the blackout system implementation is Russia's intent to isolate its citizens and crack down on dissent. It's especially heartbreaking in light of new reports of a refreshed purge of LGBT men and women in Chechnya, where at least two are dead and dozens are being held. "The new wave of persecution began in late December," wrote The Guardian, "after an administrator for an online group for LGBT people on the social network VKontakte was detained. Police used the contacts in his phone to round up others."

The Guardian confirmed the reports with a Russian newspaper, which in turn confirmed in messages via VKontakte (Russia's state-run version of Facebook).

When blackouts begin in Russia, these horrors will develop further and the world may be none the wiser.