

## Stark Lesson of Syria: U.N. Must Condemn, Not Condone, Internet Blackouts

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As CDT has said before: whether in [Egypt](#) [1] or [Libya](#) [2], [San Francisco](#) [3] or Syria, network shutdowns are never the right choice. We strongly condemn the recent Internet blackout in Syria as an indefensible violation of human rights, and agree with international authorities on free expression and human rights who stated last year in their "[Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and the Internet](#)" [4]: "Cutting off access to the Internet, or parts of the Internet, for whole populations or segments of the public (shutting down the Internet) can never be justified, including on public order or national security grounds."

The "complete network shutdown" in Syria that [began](#) [5] on Thursday—Ars Technica has an [excellent analysis](#) [6] recounting the key details of how President Bashar al-Assad's regime methodically cut the country's connections to the Internet—[has now ended](#) [7]. However, the threat of more shutdowns hangs in the air, and not only in Syria. As the provocatively titled report "[Could It Happen in Your Country?](#)" [8] makes clear, many countries have so few Internet providers as to be technically vulnerable to a state-mandated network shutdown. This continuing threat highlights the need for all nations that respect human rights and the rule of law to flatly condemn Syria's dangerous and desperate interruption of the free flow of information.

Cutting off access to communications is a crude tool that, in today's networked and Internet-dependent world, has all manner of ramifications, from stifling dissent, to suppressing freedom of speech and association and preventing access to information to causing economic disruption. There are also many more subtle and insidious ways of achieving similar ends, some of which are being discussed this week and next in Dubai at the WCIT, or World Conference on International Telecommunications. Members of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) are considering [cybersecurity-related proposals](#) [9] that could endorse new measures by governments to block, and identify the senders of, particular Internet communications. If such proposals were approved, they could legitimize, by enshrining in an international treaty, governmental efforts to establish controls on Internet traffic.

We hope that the Syrian blackout will serve as a stark lesson to rights-respecting nations that are seriously considering these proposals: any approval of Internet blocking in the ITU's treaty will offer legal and political cover to repressive governments like the Syrian regime that seek to maintain power by violating fundamental human rights and stifling the free flow of information.

Member States of the United Nations must not put their stamp of approval on security-related measures – or any other proposals at the WCIT – that could lead to or in some way justify violations of human rights.

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- [WCIT](#)
- [ITU](#)

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- [1] [https://www.cdt.org/pr\\_statement/cdt-statement-egypt-shutting-down-internet-access](https://www.cdt.org/pr_statement/cdt-statement-egypt-shutting-down-internet-access)
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- [3] <https://www.cdt.org/blogs/cynthia-wong/238welcome-san-francisco-next-stop-cairo>
- [4] <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/expression/showarticle.asp?artID=849&IID=1>
- [5] <http://www.renesys.com/blog/2012/11/syria-off-the-air.shtml>
- [6] <http://arstechnica.com/information-technology/2012/12/paint-it-black-how-syria-methodically-erased-itself-from-the-net/>
- [7] <http://www.renesys.com/blog/2012/12/restoration-in-syria-1.shtml>
- [8] <http://www.renesys.com/blog/2012/11/could-it-happen-in-your-countr.shtml>
- [9] [https://www.cdt.org/files/pdfs/Cybersecurity\\_ITU\\_WCIT\\_Proposals.pdf](https://www.cdt.org/files/pdfs/Cybersecurity_ITU_WCIT_Proposals.pdf)