

Airport Security, Tablets and Laptops: The Electronics Ban and Lessons in Futility

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Security measures are often exercises in futility. Resembling placebos, they are the reassurance authorities make as acts of intrusive inconvenience. Queues are increased at airports in the vain hope that an elusive gel carrier will be nabbed before the next detonating device is activated on a flight. Shoes are checked to see if they pass muster. Devices are scrutinised.

Now, depending on certain routes, an electronics ban on carry on items has been imposed, most notably directed by the United States and United Kingdom. This latest exercise in Anglo-American futility has again done its bit to cause disruptions in the name of the questionable. A security “source” claimed that the ban was occasioned by a plot that would have involved the use of a fake iPad, amongst other factors.

The argument for such measures never changes: they might happen because of one incident that was an exception proving the rule. Such a case took place on a Somali plane in February 2016, involving a bomb possibly concealed in a laptop. It hardly justifies such electronic measures across eight countries in North Africa and the Middle East.

The other aspect of such responses is that it falsely layers a policy of supposed soundness with thoroughness. Prohibitions of such order, by their nature, tend to require a certain fanatical dedication to vigilance. Such vigilance is never going to be effective in the way asymmetrical lateralist thinking is. A potential terrorist might be a doctrinaire in thought, but not necessarily in method.

Airport security, whatever the delays, the piousness and the faith shown by officials to make the life of a passenger harder, is never able to entirely patch or plug gaps in what is so charmingly termed the architecture of the enterprise. Cheek and daring will out.

A look, then, at these measures, suggests unevenness. For one, the devices can be simply relocated to checked-in luggage, leaving the business classes irritated at a long-haul flight where work might be done. It also flies in the face of other aviation safety rules.

Another point is made by **Shashank Joshi**, defence and intelligence specialist at London’s Royal United Services Institute. Having such restrictions on “a tablet-sized, non-metallic bomb” might be sound (he, at least, believes the British officials might be on to something), but the scope would have to measure up.

Intelligence officials in other countries differ on this point, throwing various cats amongst flocks of pigeons. The restrictions between Britain and the UK, for instance, also vary, suggesting a postmodernism of sorts in the intelligence fraternities of the countries.

“This raises questions,” notes Joshi, “about why they have arrived at different conclusions, and specifically suspicious as to whether unstated political factors may be influencing the Trump administration.”

There was little surprise that the actions of the United States targeted eight countries, following the travel ban effort by the **Trump** administration which initially went for seven, then revised the number to six. It covers flights from 10 airports in Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.[1]

The UK ban is specific to tablets, laptops, games consoles and devices larger than a mobile phone. Routes covered include inbound flights from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Turkey.

This ban was an exercise that had the notable ancillary outcome of affecting the highly competitive Gulf carrier market and airlines that have been doing rather well over the last few years in a cut throat aviation market.

Western counterparts have been shrunk and shunned off those routes, with the US market receiving considerable interest from the airlines of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

“The billions of dollars in illegal Gulf carrier subsidies,” protested American, Delta and United in recent an open letter to Donald Trump, “are brazen violations of our Open Skies agreements and a perfect example of the type of trade cheating that President Trump abhors.”[2]

The US Department of Homeland Security was attempting to advance another rationale, claiming in a press release that,

“Evaluated intelligence indicates that terrorist groups continue to target commercial aviation, to include smuggling explosive devices in various consumer items.”

Members of the legal fraternity and some policy makers have already noted a lukewarm, rather than enraged response, to the ban on large electronic devices. Trump’s March 6 executive order seemed to be considered of a different order, while an administrative and security measure of daft content is deemed more comical than a threat to liberties per se.

In the words of **Hawaii Attorney General Douglas Chin**, this suggests that the claim that Trump’s “hands are tied” by legal challenges is far from the case. A lawyer retained by Hawaii, **Neal Katyal**, has similarly observed that,

“Policies like that one, justified with respect to a particular (even if unspecified) new threat, implemented without accompanying statements of animus towards Islam, and in harmony with Congressional policies and the policies of our allies, raise no constitutional concerns.”[3]

As long as you keep Islam off the books of derision and criticism, and tailor nonsensical responses to the temper of Congress, such orders and actions are bound to sail through. Forget, however, the merit of logic in whether these are necessary, let alone effective, to

begin with.

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Notes

[1]<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/26/plot-explosives-ipad-us-uk-laptop-ban>

[2]<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/electronics-ban-middle-east-flights-draws-doubts-170321154038419.html>

[3]<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-03-25/trump-s-laptop-ban-is-proof-his-hands-aren-t-tied-hawaii-says>

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