theguardian

Experts criticize US electronic devices ban on some flights from Middle East

Technologists say new rules against electronics 'larger than a cellphone' on flights from 10 airports seem illogical and at odds with basic computer science

A TSA checkpoint at John F Kennedy International Airport in New York City. Photograph: Michael Nagle/Getty Images

Sam Thielman in New York and Sam Levin in San Francisco

Tuesday 21 March 2017 09.15 EDT

The US government's unexpected ban on laptops, iPads and other electronics "larger than a cellphone" on flights from 10 airports in the Middle East has sparked criticism from technology

experts, who say the new rules appear to be at odds with basic computer science.

Hours after the distribution of a "confidential" edict from the US Transportation Safety Administration (TSA), senior Trump administration officials told a hastily convened press briefing on Monday night the ban had been brought in after "evaluated intelligence" emerged that terrorists favored "smuggling explosive devices in various consumer items".

Passengers will be allowed to stow their devices in checked-in baggage on flights from the affected airports, which are in Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. None of them are covered by the Trump administration's ban on travel from six other mostly Muslim nations; all, in fact, are in countries which are close US allies.

Officials at the US department of homeland security (DHS) have claimed that the ban will help prevent terrorist attacks on commercial airlines, but tech experts questioned the safety implications.

If there are concerns about laptops on board being used as explosives, they said, those same risks could exist in checked baggage. Furthermore, many smartphones, which are not banned, have the same capabilities as larger devices.

"It's weird, because it doesn't match a conventional threat model," said Nicholas Weaver, researcher at the International Computer Science Institute at the University of California, Berkeley. "If you assume the attacker is interested in turning a laptop into a bomb, it would work just as well in the cargo hold."

"If you're worried about hacking, a cellphone is a computer."

Separately, some experts, including those at the Federal Aviation Administration, have previously raised concerns that the shipment of lithium batteries in airplane cargo poses a serious fire risk.

Numerous questions were raised at Monday's press briefing about the meaning of "larger than a cellphone", but the responses did not provide any clarity.

"To be honest, guys, there's a pretty universal understanding of where we're at," said one exasperated official who was repeatedly asked about how large a phone could be before it qualified as a tablet and was banned. Requirements appear to be at the discretion of the airlines.

A state department official referred reporters to "several terrorist events on airplanes in the last year", all outside the US. When pressed, a homeland security official said only one incident involved a bomb smuggled into the cabin - an explosion resulting in a single fatality on a Somali carrier called Daallo that does not fly to the US.

The DHS said passengers must submit to the ban "regardless of status and pre-clearance" and that the procedures would "remain in place until the threat changes", though a spokeswoman for Emirates told Reuters on Tuesday that the TSA directive is valid until 14 October.

Asked if the new order was an excuse to rifle through passengers' hard drives, a DHS official said: "This has absolutely nothing to do with the data in passengers' baggage."

Bruce Schneier, a security technologist, called the new rules an "onerous travel restriction".

"From a technological perspective, nothing has changed between the last dozen years and today. That is, there are no new technological breakthroughs that make this threat any more serious today," he said in an email. "And there is certainly nothing technological that would limit this newfound threat to a handful of Middle Eastern airlines."

Paul Schwartz, professor at the University of California, Berkeley law school, noted that the 9/11 hijackers had a cell in Hamburg, Germany. "One potential problem with this approach where you single out countries is that you ignore the extent to which the terrorist threat is kind of state-less," he said. "The terrorists have cells throughout the entire world."

Efforts to more broadly restrict laptops on planes would likely face widespread resistance, said Chris Hoofnagle, professor of law at the University of California. "It's a massive inconvenience to have to check a laptop, and you can imagine that such a demand is met with resistance by air carriers, who are powerful lobbies."

US airlines have been lobbying the Trump administration to intervene in the Persian Gulf, where they have contended for years that the investments in three rapidly expanding airlines in the area – Etihad Airways, Qatar, and Emirates – constitute unfair government subsidies with which Delta, American and United cannot compete. All three Middle Eastern airlines are among the carriers affected by the electronics ban.

Topics

US foreign policy

US politics Air transport news