Opinion: Banning laptops at secure airports won't keep aircraft safe from terror attacks

March 24 2017, by Michaela Preddy

Credit: Scott Webb from Pexels

Introducing new security measures for the airline industry is rarely done lightly by governments. Certainly it's underpinned by the responsibility to ensure passenger safety. But it's not clear how effective the recent ban

on laptops and large electronic devices in aircraft cabin baggage on flights from certain Middle Eastern airports to the US and UK will be.

There is evidence that airport baggage scanners in many developing world airports aren't sophisticated enough to detect the latest explosive devices that can be hidden in electronic devices. But limiting the restrictions to just ten specific airports leaves open significant other risks that could be exploited.

The laptop ban is reportedly due to "evaluated intelligence" about attempts to smuggle explosive devices in various consumer items. This is almost certainly linked to the attack on the Daallo Airlines Flight from Mogadishu, Somalia in February 2016, when an explosive device hidden in a laptop was detonated shortly after take-off.

Since this incident, there has been concern that the bomb-making capabilities of terrorist groups such as Al-Shabaab, ISIS and Al-Qaeda may have become sophisticated enough to bypass airport X-ray machines.

However, CNN terror analyst Paul Cruikshank has argued that the "layered state-of-the-art detection systems that are now in place at most airports in the developed world make it very hard for terrorists to sneak bombs onto planes". He believes that, due to the levels of technology in place, it is unlikely that any explosive device would go undetected in the screening process used in many international airports.

But security threats must still be addressed and, given that many airports in the developing world do not have this level of screening, there is no doubt that banning electronic devices from the cabin goes some way towards addressing this threat. Yet perhaps the ban implemented across ten airports, including major hubs in Doha, Istanbul and Dubai (which has the world's third busiest airport), does not go far enough.

Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Only outbound direct flights to the US and UK run by specifically named airline operators are bound by the restrictions. All the airports on the list are in countries that are either at risk from terrorism or are seen as a particular focus of terrorist activity.

But a number of the above airports operate the highly sophisticated state-of-the-art detection systems that Cruikshank refers to. If the ban is implemented at these airports, then what of those many airports in the developing world which do not have state-of-the-art machines, or benefit from highly qualified staff? And the threat of terrorism exists in other parts of the Middle East, Africa and Asia, where there is support for Al Qaeda, ISIS and other terrorist networks.

We also need to consider potential terrorist behaviour. We can't ignore the fact that terrorists may simply take an alternative route to the US or UK that isn't subject to these restrictions. In this case, the vulnerability just shifts somewhere else.

Unresolved risks

It would also be very naïve to assume that simply forcing customers to pack their electronic devices into hold baggage would be safer than taking them in the cabin. If a bomb would go undetected in carry-on luggage, there is a strong chance it wouldn't be found if it were [screened for the cargo hold](#).

Another key security risk area is not just the technology used in airports but the vulnerabilities within it. If terrorist groups are intent on attacks on aircraft, they can do so from any airport in the world by recruiting sympathisers [among airport staff](#). As happened during the Somali attack [last year](#), some airports may place their staff under less scrutiny than others, allowing access to restricted areas where devices could be placed on aircraft.

There is no doubt that terrorists will continually try and find ways to avert detection and bypass security. But shifting the vulnerability is not the solution. Only by the whole of the international aviation industry working together will the threat be minimised.

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